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By JACKSON COLE

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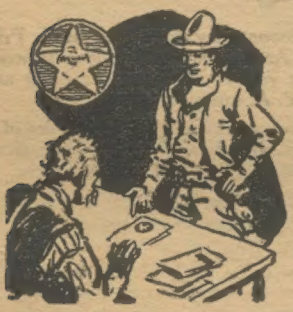
TEXAS RANGERS

VOLUME 25, NUMBER 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION FEBRUARY, 1947

COMPLETE NOVEL

GOLD FOR THE DEAD



by Jackson Cole

When a wave of bank robberies, rustling and sudden death sweeps the Nueces Country, Jim Hatfield comes a-ridin' to single out those who are the guilty parties and deliver some swift justice! Follow the Lone Wolf Lawman on an exciting, perilous powdersmoke manhunt! 11

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DOC SWAP HIRES A HAND by Ben Frank 71
"Utterly Useless" proves that he can be plumb useful when tradin' hits a snag.

NEW YEAR'S AT COYOTE CREEK by Johnston McCulley 79
Prospector Rusty Rawlins finds something far more precious than mere gold.

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THE FRONTIER POST by Captain Starr 6
A friendly get-together confab for readers, plus announcements and letters.

ADVENTURERS WANTED! by Bill Anson 70
This advertisement, back in 1822, attracted many famous Western pioneers.

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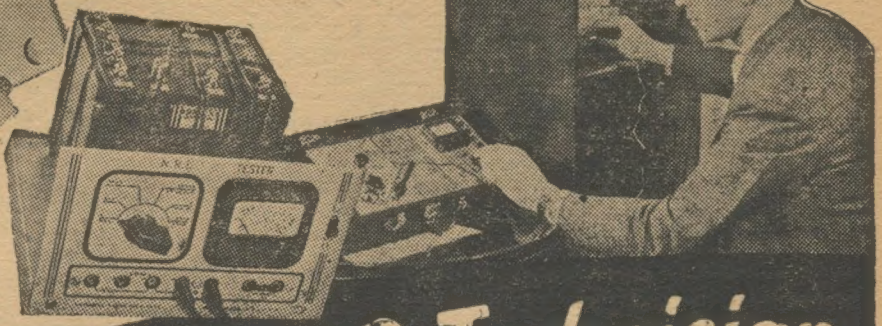

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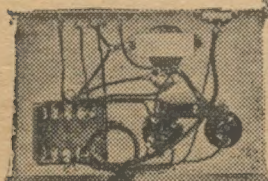
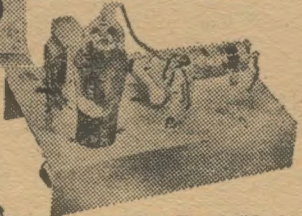


KIT 4 You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.



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HIYA, gals and galluses! Every so often something happens that makes the chore of riding herd on this Frontier Post a downright pleasure. For instance:

A Ranger Club friend went to call on his college professor. While waiting in the Prof's library, his eye fell on something familiar on the library table. The Prof entered. Says the Ranger Clubber:

"Somebody leave this magazine here?"

"No indeed!" the Prof stated emphatically. "That magazine, *Texas Rangers*, happens to be my favorite Western reading. Some really excellent stories in it."

Then, to top it off, the Prof added:

"The truth is, I get a good many ideas for my lectures out of this Frontier Post section."

A Gosh-Awful Mistake

Yessir, folks, it really happened. And I got sort of puffed up till along came a letter from S. E. Mussell of Wilder, Idaho, who scorches me for writing awhile back that the Colorado River flows into Gulf of Mexico.

Well, I never noticed any such gosh-awful mistake and I plumb hope the professor didn't. Might be I didn't have my glasses on straight and it really did happen. Anyhow, I reckon most of you, same as Friend Mussell, know that Colorado River empties into the Gulf of California, in which case no great amount of harm is done except to my puff-uppedness.

Maybe you all don't realize it, but a letter from a reader, be it praise or blame, is a warming event in this bailiwick. I most usually answer, always do when any question is asked. And my geography tallies with the map in all other cases to date.

"Wanderlust"

Here's something else that needs mentioning. It's about that poem "Wanderlust" which was printed in here awhile back. I had recollected only a few lines, asked for the rest, and it was sent by John Gartner, sportsman, writer and outdoor photographer of Long Beach, California.

Since then a flock of other folks have sent in copies of that popular poem by Gerald Gould. Among them still to be acknowledged are Rodney Setzer of Hudson, North Carolina and Mrs. John B. Tawse of Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Thank you most kindly, I had no idea so many folks shared my admiration of "Wanderlust."

An Interesting Caller

I'm on my everlasting pasear right now, "yonder to the long horizon", and came a caller to my camp right recent with talk of this and that, him not knowing I was Captain Starr with a special interest in what he had to say.

"Jack" was ranch-raised in the region of Honey Lake in Lassen County, in northern California, where his father ran cattle in years past.

"I went back for a visit and I came away sort of sad," Jack told me. "I hardly recognized those parts. Since my time, a great fire had swept our mountain range. Big spring meadows had turned to dry prairies, for the watershed was destroyed. Honey Lake had even dried up for awhile. Everything was changed. I never knew what forests meant and that the loss of them could make so much difference for so many miles around."

As he told about it, I recollected that Pyramid Lake, a drainage basin across the Nevada boundary from the Honey Lake region, has shrunk sadly in the past six-seven seasons, becoming so strong with alkali that the big trout that had made Pyramid Lake famous no longer could survive.

I reckon that if all of us could see and feel

(Continued on page 8)

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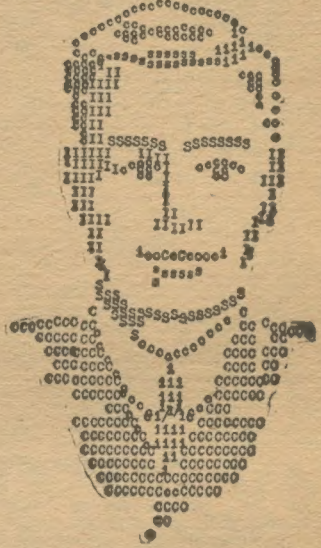
are you the I. C. S. type of man?



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THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 6)

what Jack did on his return to the old range that we'd be plenty careful with fire in the timberlands and grasslands.

The "Firestick"

While on the subject, how many of you folks know what a "firestick" is? Didn't know my ownself till a few days back. At some Forest Service stations a dry length of wood is kept and in the fire season is consulted daily for its water content to find out the relative humidity of the atmosphere, thus revealing the rate of fire danger in the woods. Weight of the stick, I'm told, gives the needed information.

Come to think of it, did you ever notice how a feather pillow behaves through weather changes? Even woolen blankets puff up (like I did when I heard about that college professor) on a dry, hot day and can be rolled up into a smaller, tighter soogan when rain clouds show up. A soogan or bedroll has helped many a cowpuncher foretell a storm.

Cutting and Splitting Axes

Real often I'm surprised to find out what a lot of things I don't know. For the past ninety years or so I've been cutting firewood according to my needs and figured that a keen blade was the only requirement. But along came a hombre three-four days back hefted my camp ax, gave it a try or two, then remarked:

"Good cutting ax. But not much of a splitting ax."

Seems as though a cutting ax has a thin blade, a splitting ax has a thick one. And all this time everybody else knew it but I didn't! Wonder if that's why woodsmen pack double-bitted axes—with one side for cutting, the other for splitting? But I don't aim to worry too much about it.

Down Texas way, mesquite firewood grows just right, doesn't call for splitting. In the time thus saved folks can stack up a flock of leisure time in the course of a season. Yessir, Texas is the place, after all.

I've often wondered why iron-hard mesquite isn't used more for making things. Rightly seasoned, it beats hickory, without which the West might never have been won. Because wagonwheels were made of tough hickory. Nothing made of wood was ever put to harder use than a wagonwheel.

Don't happen to have an old wagonwheel or so lying around, do you? They used to

(Continued on page 90)

IMAGINE THEIR JOY

WHEN THEY FOUND THEY COULD PLAY

This easy as A.B.C. way!

PLAYS ON RADIO

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*J. S., Okla.

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*H. C. S., Calif.

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*J.M., San Juan, P.R.

PLAYS AT DANCES

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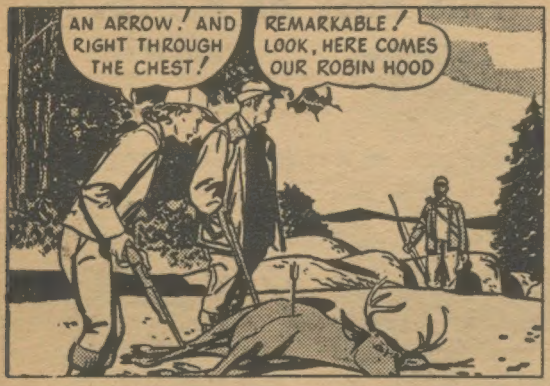

HERB HALL! WHY, DAD, HE'S THE MOVIE ARCHER!
DISCOVERED BENEATH MY BACKWOOD'S BEARD, AND AREN'T YOU PAUL LAURIE, THE FAMOUS HUNTER?

SO NEXT WEEK WE HOP TO ALASKA FOR GIANT MOOSE. LIKE TO COME ALONG?
WOULD I! AND HOW!
WONDERFUL . . HE'S KEEN
TAKE ALONG SOME THIN GILLETTES, PAL

YOU LOOK AND FEEL RIGHT ON THE BEAM WHEN YOU SHAVE WITH THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE THE SHARPEST, LONGEST-LASTING BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD. WHAT'S MORE . . . AND THIS IS IMPORTANT . . . THEY FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PERFECTLY, PROTECTING YOU FROM THE IRRITATION CAUSED BY MISFIT BLADES AND FAULTY SHAVING METHODS. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
THIN Gillette BLADES
4-10

Hatfield grabbed up a rifle, and he and the Lazy D punchers dispersed the wideloopers (CHAPTER VII)

GOLD FOR THE DEAD

By JACKSON COLE

When a wave of bank robberies, rustling and sudden death sweeps the Nueces Country, Jim Hatfield comes a-riding to single out the guilty parties and deliver swift justice!

CHAPTER I

Blood Money

OLD Sime Price, president and chief stockholder of the Lorenzo bank, stumped out of the two-story false-front that housed the bank, armed with a hammer, a square of white pasteboard and a mouthful of tacks.

Price was a tall, angular, though broad-shouldered man, with a long, scrawny neck that rose out of a low collar. His large head, scantily covered with hair, was a head that gave a physical as well as a mental effect of hardness. His sunken, smooth-shaven face seemed to bear witness that the owner was one who pushed frugality to the borders of a vice.

AN EXCITING COMPLETE JIM HATFIELD NOVEL

With his congress gaiters planted solidly on the board sidewalk, Price went to work on the front of the bank building. He shoved the white placard into place, drove the tacks home with vicious emphasis. Then, with a grunt of satisfaction, he stepped back and grimly surveyed his handiwork.

In glaring black on white the notice read:

REWARD
FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS FOR
DEAD BANK ROBBERS. NOT ONE
CENT FOR LIVE ONES!

For months the whole southwest section of the Nueces country had been plagued with bank robberies. The bankers of the community, exasperated and alarmed, headed by arrogant, iron-handed Sime Price, finally got together, primed for drastic action. Their decision, largely instigated by Price, was the reward notice that appeared simultaneously on the front of every bank building in that part of the country.

"There ain't no sense in catchin' the hellions and lockin' 'em up," Price declared. "They hire smart lawyers who rig up perjured testimony, provide alibis and get 'em off. What happened over to Dynham? And at Ewell? Them sidewinders were as guilty as sin. But did they go to jail? No! They're maverickin' around right now, and I'll bet my last peso that some of 'em had a hand in the Loma Alta safe crackin' and the Laredo stage holdup last week.

"Don't tell me nothin' different! The only way to put a stop to it is to plant 'em. When I was fightin' Injuns under General Steel, we used to say, 'The only good Injun is a dead Injun.' Uh-huh, and the only bank robber safe out of the way is a dead one."

Some of Price's associates were dubious about going to such extremes, but the ruthless old former cattleman and Border fighter overruled the more tolerant and had his way.

LESS than a week passed before Price's reward offer got results. A young cowboy walked rather unsteadily into the bank. He was plainly nervous and ill-at-ease. He slouched to the cashier's cage and glared through the grating, fumbling at a pocket beneath his chaps the while.

"What yuh want?" the cashier asked suspiciously, staring at the puncher's flushed face.

"Money," the cowboy growled truculently, "and be quick about it."

He half-raised his hand to the sill of the cage. The cashier gave a frightened yelp and ducked under his counter.

"Robbers!" he screeched. "Help! Help!"

His hysterical yell brought instant results. A tall, black-coated man, who had entered the bank a moment after the cowboy, and who was now preparing to make out a deposit slip at one of the high tables, whirled around, hand streaking to his gun. There was a flash of fire, the boom of a shot.

The cowboy threw up his hands, staggered, and slumped to the floor, drilled through the back of the head. The tall man, smoking gun in hand, bounded across the room and bent over his victim, gun ready for further action. But the cowhand had died instantly.

The tall man holstered his gun with swift ease, and as the bank employees came boiling from behind the grille, he picked up something from the floor and slipped it into his pocket.

The bank was in an uproar. Old Sime Price came pounding out of his office, bellowing profanity. He took in the situation at a glance.

"Good work, Grimes!" he bawled to the black-coated man. "So yuh got one of the sidewinders. Who in Tophet is it? Know him?"

"It's young Tom Allison of the Bar A," said Grimes, peering into the cowboy's dead face. "He was playin' poker in my place a little while ago, losin'."

"And figgered to make up his losses in here, eh?" growled Price. " A good chore, Ward, a mighty good chore, and one that'll be worth money to you."

Ward Grimes, owner of the Rambler Saloon, Lorenzo's biggest, smiled complacently, a gleam in his black eyes.

"I didn't think of that," he said. "I figgered it wasn't no time to take chances. He was reachin' when I throwed down on him."

"That's right," corroborated the still trembling cashier. "His hand was goin' into his pocket when I ducked under the counter. 'I want money,' he said, and was goin' for his gun. Another minute and he'd have had the drop on all of us. Wonder what old Crane

Allison will have to say?"

"Never mind about Crane Allison," grunted Price. "He's always been a trouble-maker, and I wouldn't be surprised if he got his start in the ranchin' business by runnin' wet cows across the River. . . ."

The following day, Sime Price, with his board of directors and prominent stockholders sitting in solemn attendance, paid five thousand dollars to Ward Grimes, and again congratulated the saloon man on his swift sizing up of the situation and undoubtedly, Price maintained, preventing a holdup of the Lorenzo bank.

Grimes modestly deprecated his feat, and accepted the five thousand.

The town buzzed over the happening. Some expressed surprise that Tom Allison who, although he drank and gambled—failings not uncommon to young cowhands—had never been mixed up in anything unlawful, so far as anybody knew. Others maintained that it was just what could be expected of the son of old Crane Allison, a salty hombre if there ever was one.

Some of the more thoughtful predicted that the thing was not ended yet, and wondered what Crane Allison might do about it. They soon found out.

The day after young Tom Allison was buried under the whispering pines that surrounded the Bar A ranchhouse, a lanky, bleak-faced old man rode into town. He had a rifle in his saddle-boot, and an old single-action Russian model .44 slung low against his right thigh. He dismounted, hitched his horse to a convenient rack, and strode across the street to the swinging doors of Ward Grimes' Rambler Saloon.

JIM HATFIELD

Business was good in the Rambler, though it was but early afternoon. Ward Grimes stood at the far end of the bar, smoking a cigar, a contemplative look on his swarthy face as he estimated the day's "take."

Suddenly through the babble of talk sounded a long-drawn yell:

"Ward Gri-i-i-imes!"

Dead silence fell inside the saloon. There were old-timers in the crowd, and they instantly recognized that long-drawn yell for

what it was—the challenge of a gun-packing gent inviting his enemy to come out and "talk it over" through the smoke.

WARD GRIMES stiffened. The cigar fell from his suddenly limp fingers. He stared toward the swinging doors.

"Ward Gri-i-i-imes!"

Again came the yell, grim, insistent.

"It's old Crane Allison!" somebody exclaimed, peering through a window. "He's heeled!"

All eyes turned to Ward Grimes, who stood rigid at the end of the bar. How would he take it?

There was only one way he could take it, if he cared anything for the respect of his associates. That was to walk out of the saloon ready to accept the challenge. Otherwise he would "crawl."

Grimes enjoyed the reputation of being a salty hombre, but nevertheless he whitened perceptibly as for a third time the challenging yell shattered the silence. A low hum ran over the room.

Grimes glanced about, and met a battery of eyes trained on him. He hesitated an instant longer, then seemed to gather himself together. With queer, jerky steps he walked to the swinging doors, his knuckles whitening from the force with which he gripped his gun butt. At the doors he halted, then went through them with a rush, jerking his six from its sheath. The air exploded to a roar of gunfire.

Five seconds later, Ward Grimes lay on the board sidewalk in front of his saloon, retching and moaning, a bullet through his right shoulder, another through his left leg.

Old Crane Allison, one shirt sleeve shot to ribbons, a red smear across one sunken cheek, stood stern and erect, staring down at the prostrate killer of his son.

Fifteen minutes after that, Grimes was being patched up in the doctor's office, who considered he had a chance to pull through. Crane Allison was in jail, with a charge of attempted murder being prepared against him.

The whole section seethed with argument over the shooting. Since Price and his banker associates staunchly upheld Ward Grimes, pointing out that a coroner's jury had absolved Grimes of blame in the killing of young Tom Allison, and denouncing old Crane Allison for taking the law into his own hands.

On the other hand, Crane Allison's friends—and they were many, chiefly among the cowmen—maintained that Allison had had sufficient provocation for shooting it out with Grimes. He had only followed the code of the Old West, they asserted. They called to the attention of all and sundry that young Tom Allison had no record of lawbreaking and had been no wilder than any number of young cowhands of the section.

Price countered with the cashier's testimony that young Allison had demanded money when he had approached the window, and had reached in the direction of his gun. The fact was stressed that he was not one of the bank's depositors. What right, then, did he have to come into the bank and demand money? He must have had robbery in mind when he did that, the bankers declared.

While the argument was at its height, another killing took place at nearby Dynham. A worker in one of the mines was caught loitering in an alley back of the Dynham bank in the early dusk by a newly appointed deputy town marshal, who had formerly been a bartender.

The deputy started questioning him and the man, said the deputy, reached for his gun. The deputy shot him. On the dead man's person was found a half-stick of dynamite and a short length of fuse. Evidence, the deputy maintained, that the man had planned to blow the bank vault.

The Dynham bankers agreed with him, and another five-thousand dollars in reward money was paid out.

"Good work!" declared Sime Price. "A little more of this and the country will be cleaned of the varmints."

"But it hasn't stopped bank holdups," his opponents countered when, shortly afterward, the banks at Oakville, Eagle and Casterville were robbed in quick succession, and with an expert efficiency that was bewildering.

Old Sime exulted grimly, however, when two Mexicans were slain in the doorway of the Armstrong bank. They had been accosted by the town marshal, who had seen them loitering there. An argument had ensued, the Mexicans maintaining evasively that they were waiting for a man who was to meet them there.

In the course of the argument, the marshal said, one had drawn a knife. He had shot them both—and collected rewards for both.

"Hang on with both hands!" Hatfield yelled to the cowboy, grabbed the horse's bit and went racing across the prairie (CHAPTER X)

CHAPTER II

Chuckline Rider

TWO of the most outspoken deprecators of Sime Price's program were Sheriff Woll Baylor and Carter Renshaw, owner of the big Double R spread.

Sheriff Baylor was gaunt, sunken and uncommunicative. He had been an associate of Sime Price's in the days of their hectic youth, and the two were firm friends, though often differing over matters of policy.

"You fellers are playin' the plumb fool, Sime," Sheriff Baylor declared bluntly. "Yuh're payin' out good money for what? For the questionable killin's of some shiftless scum, and all the while sidewinders with plenty of savvy are raisin' perdition hereabouts and shovin' a chunk under the corner."

"Seems to me it's the business of the sheriff's office to put a stop to that," Price interpolated sarcastically.

"I ain't arguin' none about that," Baylor admitted. "But that's beside the question. I'm talkin' about what you banker fellers are doin'. Bank robbery ain't a capital offense in Texas, so long as nobody gets hurt, but you fellers are makin' it one."

"Hellions with bank robbin' notions ought to be killed," the indomitable old Sime declared.

"Mebbeso," Baylor said, "but it ain't the law of the land, and you fellers ain't no more business takin' the law into yore own hands than anybody else. Yuh're walkin' on mighty thin ice, Sime, and sooner or later somethin' is goin' to happen that won't be nice. Yuh'll end up packin' a hefty load on yore conscience."

"My conscience ain't never failed me yet," growled Price. Which declaration put to end a conversation that had already continued too long.

Carter Renshaw, who joined his protests with those of Sheriff Baylor, was an exceedingly tall, handsome and well set-up man. He was comparatively new to that part of the Nueces country, having arrived the year before from the Big Bend. He had bought the Double R from Peasley Wallace, a shiftless individual with scant ambition, a fast gun hand and a liking for red-eye.

Renshaw had kept Wallace on as foreman of the spread, a job the former Double R owner was fitted for both by experience and natural ability, when sober. Renshaw kept him sober when there was work to be done. Wallace spent most of his leisure hours in Ward Grimes' Rambler Saloon.

Renshaw had made the Double R pay, which Wallace never had. He had got rid of the few slipshod punchers who had made up Wallace's outfit, and brought in his own men from back where he had come from. They were hard-eyed, alert and efficient cowhands who did their work well and kept largely to themselves, although they could be sociable enough on occasion. Renshaw and his men had come to be well-liked.

Renshaw was generally a man of even temper, but he was far from even-tempered the day he rode to Sheriff Baylor's office wrathfully to report the wideloopings of a herd of prime beef cattle from his big southwest range.

"We trailed the hellions across the Bar A and past Coffin Mountain to the desert," he explained. "We lost 'em out there on that burned-over mess of shiftin' sands. Sime Price is to blame for all this ruckus-raisin', Baylor!"

"Now, now, Cart," protested the sheriff. "Yuh ain't got no right to go blamin' Sime for what's happenin'. How do yuh figger he's to blame, anyhow?"

"How do I figger it?" exploded Renshaw. "Here's how! Every owlhoot in Texas has heard about them rewards Sime and the other bankers are offerin'. They figger if the banks can afford such reward money, there must be fat pickin's around here, and they're flockin' in. I tell you yuh ain't seen nothin' yet, Baylor. You watch! Nothin's goin' to be safe hereabouts from now on. What's happened is just the beginnin'. Wait till them hellions that are driftin' in learn what the Laredo stage carries. Just wait! Price is plumb loco, and you know it!"

"He's stubborn as a blue-nosed mule," Baylor admitted. "Mebbe yuh're right about what yuh're sayin', Cart."

"You know cussed well I'm right!" growled Renshaw. "But what about my beefs? Yuh goin' to try and run them hellions down?"

"Yuh say yuh trailed 'em to the desert," Baylor pointed out. "The county line is right down there, Cart. You know I got no authority beyond that line."

With a disgusted snort, Renshaw flung out

of the office and headed for the Rambler for a drink.

Sheriff Baylor sat alone in his office, his brows knitted, thinking deeply. Finally he drew pen and ink from a drawer and laboriously scrawled a letter. He addressed the envelope to Captain Bill McDowell, Texas Ranger Post Headquarters. . . .

THE southwestern part of McMullen County, Texas, is rough, with various elevations rising, in popular speech, to the dignity of mountains. One of the most noted of these is Coffin Mountain, famous in tradition and legend. Bandits who preyed on traffic over the "lower trail" from Laredo to San Antonio holed up on Coffin Mountain, as did other gentlemen of questionable antecedents and unpredictable futures.

Coffin Mountain came rightly by its sinister name. Enough bodies had become desiccated in the dry air on and around the ominous hill to justify it. Dusty bones could be turned up almost anywhere in the thickets that clothed its sides, or skeletons glaring from empty sockets in the gloom of the caves that honeycombed its cliffs and ledges could be found.

South of Coffin Mountain ran a trail from which the gray shimmer of the turbulent waters of the Gulf could be seen, a trail that slithered across the seventy terrible miles of parched desert to the Rio Grande. It followed the coast line for some distance, then turned sharply north to glide in the shadow of the mountain, from the main street of Lorenzo, and finally reached San Antonio.

The *Pasajero*—Traveler Trail—it had been named. Probably because, according to oldtimers, "gents ridin' it usually shore do travel!"

The man who rode northward along the trail, some two weeks after Sheriff Baylor had written his letter to Captain Bill McDowell, could hardly be called "traveling," although his magnificent golden sorrel had the look of a cayuse that could make speed a-plenty, should occasion arise.

Both horse and rider were thickly powdered with the gray dust of the desert, but neither showed any signs of fatigue, despite the evidence of long and hard riding.

The man was as noteworthy as the splendid animal he forked. Unusually tall, much more than six feet, he was deep of chest, broad of shoulder, lean of waist and hips. He wore the homely garb of the rangeland—overalls, soft blue shirt, vivid handkerchief looped about his sinewy throat, dimpled, broad-brimmed "J.B.," batwing chaps, and well-worn boots of softly tanned leather. Double cartridge belts encircled his waist, and from the carefully oiled and worked cut-out holsters, protruded the black butts of heavy guns.

His face was deeply bronzed, lean as to cheek, with a powerful jaw, a high-bridged nose with sensitive nostrils, and a rather wide mouth, grin-quirked at the corners. Long, level green eyes were set beneath brows as black as the thick lashes and the crisp hair revealed by the pushed-back hat. It revealed a forehead singularly white in contrast to the dark coloring of the lower part of his face.

He lounged in the saddle with the careless grace of a lifetime on horseback—Jim Hatfield, Texas Ranger, riding beneath a sky of hurrying cloud-wrack and wild white stars. The man whom a stern old Lieutenant of the Rangers had named the Lone Wolf!

The night showed promise of being a wild one. The angry red of the sunset had faded in the west amid a tossing mass of turbulent clouds, reflecting luridly from the black wall rising slowly above the eastern horizon. Now the mighty battlements of dark vapor had reached the zenith. From it shot slim streamers like stabbing lances, and rolling fronts that were as bodies of charging horse.

From the waters of the bay came a low moaning. The naked tree branches tossed wildly in a wailing wind. A sibilant hissing and rustling ran through the mesquite. Clouds of dust rose from the surface of the trail—cosmic dancers of the star-burned night, writhing and twisting, pirouetting grotesquely amid the shadows.

To the north were vast reaches of wild, thorny pasture. Hatfield could hear *ladino* cows popping the bushes, though not a horn was in sight.

"She's quite a country, feller," he muttered to his horse. "Reckon most anything can happen hereabouts, and most generally does. Wonder how much farther we got to go to reach that darn town of Lorenzo. Shore could stand some chuck about now. And I've a notion you sort of hanker to put on the nosebag, yuh darn old grass burner. We swallowed so much dust crossin' that infernal desert that by now we must have growed chicken gizzards to take care of it. June along, hoss. We got places to go."

The trail curved away from the moaning bay and flowed north, with a slight trend to the east. Still far ahead, the dark loom of Coffin Mountain shouldered the sky, and its vast shadow fell across the trail and darkened the chaparral beyond. Over the craggy summit of the mountain hung a red and gibbous moon, now burning luridly, now obscured by the racing cloud wrack.

An owl whistled eerily from the top of a blasted pine. A disgruntled coyote answered with a querulous yipping. Somewhere a steer wailed thinly. A night hawk almost brushed Hatfield's face with its silent wings, and its vicious scream set Goldy to snorting and dancing.

"Steady," Hatfield told him. "That feller is just big talk. He wouldn't tackle anything heftier than a jack-rabbit. That is if he was a hawk at all, and not the ghost of Lafitte or Moro or some other of the old pirate gents who used to ride herd out there on the bay. This is just the sort of night yuh could expect them to be maverickin' around."

GOLDY snorted his disgust with such superstition, and Hatfield chuckled. He gazed toward the black mass of the mountain and Goldy's head turned north. There was something grim and menacing about the huge, inchoate bulk, with the red moon hanging over it like a sullen danger light and the thickening cloud veil dimming the stars.

Suddenly the red light of the moon seemed to reflect from the mountain top as from a mirror. Swiftly the reddish glow under the irregular red disc spread and heightened. It became a leaping flame that danced and flickered. For several moments it burned fiercely, then abruptly it died to a smolder, a glow, and vanished.

"Now what in blazes?" wondered the Lone Wolf. "Why would somebody build a fire up top that pile of rocks and then douse it just as it got goin' good?"

He continued to stare toward the mountain top as he rode, but there was no repetition of the phenomenon. The rocky crest remained dark and shadowy, with only the glow of the moonlight seeping over its crags. Hatfield shrugged and gave his attention to his more immediate surroundings.

In the east began a low mutter of thunder, with occasional lightning flickers. The rolling wall curved over the zenith, crept westward. The stars vanished, then the moon. The night became black as pitch.

Louder and louder sounded the thunder. The wind increased in volume. To Hatfield's ears again came the lonely moan of the bay. Loosened twigs began to spatter down on the trail.

Goldy's ears suddenly pricked sharply forward. The next moment Hatfield also heard what had attracted the sorrel's attention. Swelling out of the north was a pounding beat that swiftly grew louder.

"Hosses," the Ranger muttered. "Lots of 'em, and comin' this way fast."

He pulled Goldy to a halt and sat listening intently.

"Better give them hustlin' gents plenty of room," he decided.

CHAPTER III

Reception Committee

HASTILY Jim Hatfield backed Goldy off the trail and into the fringe of brush that flanked it. The pounding hoofbeats swelled to a rumbling roar that drowned the thunder overhead. They were directly ahead, now. Then they were surging past to the accompaniment of the rumbling and bleating of irritated cattle.

Suddenly the sky flamed with light as a jagged lightning flash split the clouds from horizon to zenith. The scene was instantly as bright as day.

In the bluish glare Hatfield had a vision of tossing horns, rolling eyes and shaggy backs. The herd was almost past where he sat his horse at the edge of the trail. Riding hard on the heels of the cattle, with loose reins and busy spurs, were half a dozen horsemen who urged the lumbering cows to greater efforts.

Hatfield heard a startled yell from their ranks. Instantly he went sideward from the saddle. There was a roar of gunfire, a crackling of bullets through the branches over his head. Goldy snorted explosively and lunged back into the brush.

Prone on the ground, Hatfield jerked both guns from their sheaths and sent a stream of lead hissing toward the unseen horsemen, who were now enveloped in the blackness of the night. A yell of pain echoed the shots. A bullet or two whined past in answer.

But the roll of hoofbeats was undiminished. Swiftly they faded into the south.

"Nice little reception committee," the Lone Wolf muttered wrathfully, as he got to his feet and dusted himself off. "Reckon I winged one of the hellions, from the way he yelped. Now what is *this* all about? Slingin' lead at a plumb stranger! And they shore were shovin' them cows along. I've a prime notion some spread hereabouts is goin' to be missin' a herd of beefs in the mornin'."

Again the lightning flamed in the sky, but revealed only an empty stretch of trail to the next bend. Hatfield stared southward a moment, then got Goldy out of the brush, forked him and rode north. He loosened his slicker from behind the cantle and donned it.

He had no more than buttoned it close about his throat when the first spatter of raindrops quickly increased to a steady downpour. Goldy's glossy coat steamed, and streamed water. Hatfield cuffed his hat over one eye to let the rain slosh off without obscuring his vision.

Not that there was much of anything to see. The night, except when the blue glare of the lightning beat against the veil of rain, was as black as the inside of a bull in fly time.

Gradually, however, the rain lessened. The storm was roaring westward, booming its way across the desert which thirstily drank in the unaccustomed deluge. Stars appeared in the east. Then the moon, almost below the topmost crags of the mountain, sent a reddish beam drifting across the sodden growth. And in the sudden flood of bloody radiance, Hatfield saw the dark bulk of a ranchhouse looming a little distance to the right of the trail.

"Well, this is somethin' like," he thought. "Reckon a plumb wet and hungry gent ought to be able to drop a loop on a bed here. We'll chance it, anyhow."

A beaten roadway curved from the trail to the door of the ranchhouse. With the rain completely stopped now, Hatfield paused long enough to remove his wet slicker, because of the muggy heat, and fastened it loosely to the back of his saddle. Then he rode up the road a little way, reined Goldy in, and shouted. Etiquette of the rangeland forbade a man riding up to a door and knocking after dark, even though the hour was not particularly late.

For several minutes there was no response to his hail. Then abruptly a light flickered inside the house. Hatfield saw a shadow cross a window in the direction of the door.

The four men by the fire leaped to their feet with yelps of alarm (CHAPTER XIV)

He swung down from the saddle and mounted the veranda steps, whistling softly under his breath.

There was the rattle of a drawn bolt, the door swung open—and Hatfield stiffened, his hands hovering above the black butts of his guns.

He was staring squarely into the muzzle of a leveled rifle.

But it was not the threatening muzzle that caused the Lone Wolf's eyes to widen with astonishment. It was the small, red-haired, blue-eyed girl who was back of the gun.

For a moment Hatfield was at a loss what to do or say. Then, as his keen eyes noted something, his wide mouth grin-quirked at the corners, his strangely colored eyes grew sunny, and he chuckled.

"Ma'am," he drawled, "when yuh take a notion to throw down on a gent, it's a mighty good idea not to have the hammer of yore shootin' iron on safety. Yuh just naturally couldn't get anywheres with that hammer where it is right now."

The girl gave a startled gasp. Her glance dropped to the stock of the Winchester. The man was right. The hammer *was* at half-cock.

HER glance flew back to the laughing eyes of the tall man in front of her, and under the undisguised amusement of his gaze, she flushed hotly. Hatfield was standing with the thumbs of his slender, powerful hands hooked over his cartridge belts. Directly under his palms were the black butts of his long-barreled Colts. The girl with the half-cocked rifle in her hands was as helpless as if the Winchester had been in the next county.

Abruptly she lowered the rifle.

"Come in," she invited, "and stop laughing at me!"

Hatfield glanced over his shoulder.

"My hoss?" he said questioningly.

"I'll have him taken care of right away," replied the girl. "Come in, before the wind blows the light out."

Hatfield entered, closing the door behind him, his level gaze taking in his surroundings. As he moved across the room, a cautious step sounded on the porch outside. The girl turned quickly.

"An old feller with gray whiskers," Hatfield remarked. "He was lookin' in the window just a minute ago."

"It's Stiffy, one of my hands," the girl said. She crossed to the door and opened it.

"Come in, Stiffy," she called.

A blocky old fellow sidled into the room, glancing suspiciously at Hatfield.

"I heard this feller whoop," he announced. "Figgered I'd better slip up and see who it was. Thought mebbe it might be that pesky Carter Renshaw snoopin' around."

"Now, now, Stiffy," the girl chided gently. "Mr. Renshaw has never done anything wrong. He's been very kind."

"Don't like him," grunted "Stiffy." "Don't like his eyes. They're yeller, like a cat's."

"I've known some purty nice cats," Hatfield interpolated, with a chuckle.

"Uh-huh, they're nice—when they want somethin' of yuh," Stiffy growled. "But rub their fur the wrong way a mite and see what happens."

"Don't reckon any of us like having our fur rubbed the wrong way," Hatfield said smilingly.

Stiffy grunted. He ran his eye over the Ranger's towering form with distinct approval.

"I'll look after yore hoss," he offered, then looked at the girl. "I've a notion this feller could stand a mite of chuck and a cup or two of steamin' coffee, Miss Mary. He's as damp as if he'd been ridin' the river. I'll get a fire goin' in the stove soon as I bed down that cayuse."

"Yuh got somethin' there, feller," Hatfield agreed heartily. "I'll get the fire goin', if yuh'll show me where the kitchen is."

"I'll show you," said the girl the puncher had called Miss Mary. "I'm sorry about the way I greeted you, but we've had trouble, and never know what to expect. We're a little suspicious of strangers."

"Yuh don't seem to be specially scared of a stranger, though," Hatfield remarked.

"No," the girl replied slowly. "A woman instinctively knows whom she should fear. I don't fear you, and I don't think I ever would. Nor would any woman, for that matter."

"Thank yuh, ma'am," Hatfield said.

"Besides, I saw that Stiffy took a liking to you at first glance," she added. "My father always said Stiffy was a mighty good judge of people. That's why I can't understand why he's taken such a dislike to Carter Renshaw. Mr. Renshaw owns the Double R, the spread over to the east of ours. He has been very kind and helpful since my father was—was taken away."

"Yuh mean yore father is dead, ma'am?"

the Ranger asked sympathetically.

The girl's soft lips tightened.

"My father is in jail," she replied quietly. "In jail for shooting the man who killed my brother."

Hatfield stared at the girl, after this rather startling announcement, at a loss just what to say. Before he could speak, she abruptly changed the subject.

"The kitchen is out this way," she said, taking a lamp from the table. "If you'll get the fire started, I'll make us some supper. I'm hungry, too."

In the big roomy kitchen of the ranch-house, Hatfield soon had a fire going in the range. The girl busied herself with various utensils. Shortly old Stiffy came stumping in again.

"That's some hoss yuh got, son," he said to Hatfield. "He's all took care of proper. I'm goin' to bed. You younkers are able to stay up and gab all night, but an old feller has to have his rest."

"We'll try and finish getting that herd together on the south range, tomorrow," the girl told him.

"Uh-huh," agreed Stiffy. "We'd ought to finish her up tomorrow. I'll bet the boys down there are cussin' about now. That rain was a drencher."

WITH a nod to Hatfield, he left the room. When supper was ready the girl and the tall Ranger sat down to an appetizing meal.

"I suppose you were rather surprised at what I said back in the living room," she remarked. "Guess I'd better tell you about it. I'm Mary Allison. My father is Crane Allison, and this is the Bar A Ranch."

Hatfield supplied his name in turn, and then for some time he listened intently to the girl's account of what had recently happened.

"My brother had never been in any trouble," Mary Allison concluded. "I don't say he wasn't wild, and reckless. Most of the young men around here are. But I know he would never have had anything to do with a crime like bank robbery."

"Why, do yuh suppose, did he go into the bank that way and ask for money?" Hatfield asked.

"I have no idea," Mary said, shaking her head. "I feel that possibly the cashier might have misunderstood what he said. The bank people around here have been nervous of late. There has been lots of trouble."

"He couldn't have been asking for a loan?" asked Hatfield.

"He would have known he couldn't get a loan from the bank," she said slowly. "You see, my brother was two years younger than I am, and I'm just past twenty-one. He was not of age, and couldn't have borrowed money from the bank, having no security to offer."

"If yore father would have agreed to indorse his note, he might have been able to," Hatfield pointed out.

Again the girl shook her bright head.

"My father would have had no security to offer," she explained. "It is not generally known, but the ranch is in my name. My mother owned the spread when my father married her, and she willed it to me. My father was my guardian until last year, then the property came to me."

"I see," Hatfield nodded thoughtfully. "And yore brother knew that, of course?"

"Yes, he knew it," she said, and added bitterly, "The bankers are doing a terrible thing by offering those rewards. They are putting a premium on killing."

"Taking the law into yore own hands is always bad business," Hatfield agreed gravely. "They are convictin' folks before they are brought to trial. Doubtless, though, they feel they are justified."

"It hasn't stopped the bank robberies," Mary said sharply. "There have been more since the rewards were offered than before."

"Any other trouble around here?" Hatfield asked.

"A lot of cattle have been stolen."

"Where do they run 'em? Stolen cows are no good unless yuh can find a market for them."

"To Mexico, I suppose," Mary said, with a sigh.

"Across seventy miles of desert?" Hatfield looked his surprise.

"Where else could they take them?" she said. "They certainly couldn't keep them here, and they couldn't run them north or east. There is nothing to the west but hills and desert. Not a ranch within a hundred miles. They would have to take them south, and there is no trailing anything across the desert between here and the Rio Grande. The sands are constantly shifting and wipe out all tracks. A big herd was run off Carter Renshaw's Double R just a couple of weeks back. Renshaw trailed them out onto the desert, and lost the trail there. They were

headed southwest—toward Mexico."

Hatfield said nothing further, but his black brows drew together until the concentration furrow was deep between them.

CHAPTER IV

Another Lost Herd

MARY ALLISON and Hatfield were enjoying a final cup of steaming coffee when a clatter of hoofs sounded outside. They heard the bunkhouse door banged open, then an excited chatter of voices, followed by steps running swiftly toward the ranchhouse. Mary hurried to the door and flung it open.

Old Stiffy and another elderly waddy entered, supporting between them a young cowboy who reeled drunkenly on dragging feet. His eyes were wild, his face white and haggard. One cheek was crusted with dried blood that had oozed from a ragged furrow just above his left eyebrow.

"Chuck!" gasped the girl. "What happened to you?"

"Plugged!" the cowboy mumbled. "Knocked me off my hoss and down into the brush. Reckon the hellions figgered I was done for. Anyhow, they didn't come to finish me. The rain brought me to. Managed to catch my hoss and hang on till I got here."

"Where's Hank Watson?" asked Mary Allison anxiously.

"Dead," the cowboy muttered. "Drilled dead center. They got the herd."

"Who did it?" demanded Stiffy.

"How the thunderation would I know?" complained "Chuck." "I heard hosses comin' out of the brush, then the whole world blew up inside my head. When I come to, I found Watson cashed in. The herd was gone."

As Stiffy was about to voice another question, Hatfield interrupted.

"First chore is to look after this feller," he said. "Set him down in that chair. Get me rags and hot water. That head of his needs attention."

Swiftly, efficiently, he cleansed the wound. He probed the skull beneath with sensitive fingers and decided that there was no fracture.

"Hit yuh a nasy lick, but yuh'll be all right soon as the headache wears off," he told the puncher. "Yuh say yuh didn't see any of the hellions?"

The cowboy wearily shook his head.

"Didn't see nothin'," he reiterated.

"I figger *I* did, though," Hatfield suddenly remarked.

The others glanced quick inquiry at him. Briefly he recounted what had happened on the trail south of Coffin Mountain.

"That would be the herd, all right," Stiffy declared. "Headin' for the desert. How many of the hellions did yuh say there was?"

"About six, I'd say," Hatfield told him. "They were shovin' the cows along almighty fast. Too fast to make sense, I'd say."

"How's that?" asked Stiffy.

"As yuh know, cows can soon be run off their feet," Hatfield explained. "A plumb down herd could never make it across the desert. Them hellions must have known that they didn't have anything to worry about, that there wasn't a chance of anybody bein' on their tail. They evidently figgered they'd done for both night hawks, and that it would be way past mornin' before anybody found out what had happened. Why all this hurry, then?"

"The owlhoot sort is always scared of somethin'," was Stiffy's explanation.

Hatfield did not comment further.

"This feller had better be got to bed," he said instead, as he finished bandaging the wounded puncher's head.

"And, Stiffy, you and Jasper ride out in the morning and bring in poor Watson's body," the girl directed.

After the cowboys had gone, Hatfield and the girl sat regarding each other.

"Seems like yore troubles are pilin' up, ma'am," the Lone Wolf observed sympathetically.

"Yes," she sighed. "The loss of those beefs hurts. I have obligations to meet. Poor Hank Watson's death leaves me short-handed, too. Good riders are hard to get around here." She eyed the Ranger contemplatively. "Are you just passing through?" she asked.

"That depends," Hatfield said. "If I could tie onto a good job of ridin' I might stick around a spell."

"I can use another tophand," Mary suggested.

Hatfield countered with a question.

"How far is it to that town of Lorenzo, the county seat?"

"Lorenzo is twenty miles north of here, by way of the Pasajero Trail, the trail you were

riding," she informed him.

"I'd figgered on ridin' up there tomorrow," Hatfield said thoughtfully, "and anyhow I reckon the sheriff's office ought to be notified of this widelooping. If that's satisfactory to you, ma'am, I'll be back before dark."

"That will be fine," Mary Allison replied to the oblique acceptance of the job she offered.

"Then I reckon I'll pound my ear for a spell," Hatfield said. "Been up for quite a while."

"You can sleep in the spare room, just off the living room," she said. "You'll find it more comfortable than the bunkhouse. Stiffy used to sleep there, but he says he'd rather be in the bunkhouse, where he can listen to the boys talk in their sleep. He says he's got the whole outfit paying hush money to him."

FOR the first time since meeting her, Hatfield saw her smile.

"I've a notion she's one mighty purty girl when she's happy," he told himself a little later, as he sat on the comfortable bed in the spare room, cleaning and oiling his guns. "Not that she's hard to look at as it is."

As is often the way with men who ride much alone, Hatfield had a habit of talking to his horse, or even to his guns. Now he held converse with the big Colts as he gave them a careful going over.

"Looks like I'm getting a break," he mused. "This job of ridin' will give me an excuse for hangin' around in this neck of the woods, and I've got a hunch that whatever happens hereabouts is goin' to sort of center on this spread. The old man in jail, the boy killed. A trouble-buildin' situation for fair. And from what that old sheriff wrote Captain McDowell, it looks like plenty is bustin' loose.

"Wonder what about that killin'? Shore don't look as if a girl like her could have a brother who'd go in for bank robbin', but yuh never can tell. But, it's plumb shore the old man is a salty proposition. Shot it out with the jigger who downed his son, in regular Old West style. I'll have to try and get a word with him.

"Wonder where in blazes them widelooped steers get to? It's just about certain they ain't run across the desert to *manana* land. But if they ain't, as that girl said, where do they take 'em? After lookin' the lay of the land over a mite, I may be able to find an answer to that. . . ."

Hatfield was in the saddle early the following morning, and before long had reached Lorenzo. He found it to be a typical cowtown with the appearance of being plenty lively on occasion. In front of a squat building with barred windows he dismounted and left Goldy tied securely to the morning breeze. "SHERIFF'S OFFICE," read a battered sign swinging above the door.

Mounting a couple of steps, he shoved open the door and entered. A lanky old fellow, sitting at a table cleaning a gun looked up and nodded a greeting.

"You the sheriff?" Hatfield asked.

The oldster shook his head. "Nope," he replied. "Sheriff's out right now. I'm in jail here."

Hatfield glanced at the wide open door leading to the cells in the back of the building, and surveyed the comfortably furnished office.

"Sort of nice jail," he commented, with a grin.

[*Turn page*]

Many Never Suspect Cause of Backaches

This Old Treatment Often Brings Happy Relief

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. *(Adv.)*

"Fair to middlin'," the lanky man agreed. "Sort of drafty of nights, though, when Woll Baylor forgets and leaves that door open. Woll is the sheriff. He's all right, only he's got a bad habit of wakin' me up at all hours to tell me his troubles. Reckon he's got plenty, all right. Last night he was wonderin' if he couldn't arrange it to stay here in jail for a spell and let me be sheriff."

"Mebbe he's got somethin' there." Hatfield's grin broadened.

"Mebbe." The prisoner nodded. "But I couldn't see it. Pull up a chair and save boot leather."

Hatfield accepted the invitation and sat down. He fished out the "makin's" and rolled a cigarette with the slim fingers of his left hand.

"Reckon yuh're Crane Allison," he remarked.

"Reckon I am," the oldster admitted. "How come yuh to know me, son?"

"I'm working for yuh," Hatfield said. "Anyhow, yore daughter hired me to a job of ridin' last night."

Crane Allison gave him a sharp look. "That so?" he said. "How's things down to the spread?"

"Not so good." Hatfield shook his head gravely. "Yuh lost a herd of cows last night, and one of yore hands, feller named Watson, was cashed in."

Crane Allison straightened in his chair. His lined face showed concern.

"Watson!" he exclaimed. "Hank Watson! Are yuh shore?"

"That's what was said," Hatfield replied. "Feller they called Chuck rode in with a creased head and reported it."

ALLISON stared at the Ranger.

"Pore old Hank," he muttered. "Pore old Hank. He'd rode for me for years."

Abruptly he got to his feet and began striding up and down the office.

"I gotta get outa this cussed jail," he growled.

"Can't yuh raise bail?" Hatfield asked.

"Held without bail, pendin' the outcome of that blasted Ward Grimes' injuries," snapped Allison. "Grimes is the feller I shot."

"Grimes in a bad way?" asked the Ranger.

"Shucks, no!" snorted Allison. "He's gettin' along fine. But old Sime Price, the bank president, and his outfit, have a lot of pull with the courts. He talked Judge Wheeler into refusin' me bail. That's about the size of it."

Hatfield nodded thoughtfully.

"Why are they so anxious to keep yuh locked up?" he asked.

"Just contrary cussedness, I reckon," Allison said. "Price is stubborn as a bluenosed mule and when he figgers he's right about somethin', all tarnation can't move him. Don't get me wrong, son, I'm not accusin' Sime Price of doin' anythin' underhanded. I've knowed him for years, and a more honest hellion don't live. If yuh can show him he's wrong about somethin', he'll come right out and admit it, no matter how much it hurts. But once he figgers he's right, it takes a heap of showin' to change him.

"He's plumb certain my boy went into that bank to hold it up. I figger he's just as certain in his own mind that it's dangerous to have me runnin' loose, so he's doin' everything he can to keep me hogtied. He's standin' up for Ward Grimes not because he has any particular use for Grimes, but because he figgers Grimes was justified in what he did."

Hatfield nodded again. He was familiar with the type.

CHAPTER V

No Peaches in Lorenzo

SILENCE which ensued after old Crane Allison's outburst was finally broken by the sound of hurried steps approaching the office. The door was flung open and a tall, broad-shouldered, and finely formed man hurried in. His tawny hair was inclined to curl and his eyes were a light brown. His face showed his agitation.

"Hello, Renshaw," greeted Allison. "What's all the hurry?"

"I got bad news for yuh, Allison," said Renshaw, darting a keen glance at Hatfield. "Where's Baylor?"

"He's out right now," said Allison. "Expect him back any minute. What's the bad news?"

"Ward Grimes is dead!"

"Dead! Why I heard he was comin' along fine!"

"That's what everybody thought," said Renshaw. "I was over to Doc's place last night and he was chipper as a jaybird. This

mornin' when Doc stepped in to look him over, he was cashed in. Doc said a blood clot must of got to his heart. A thrombosis, I think he called it."

Crane Allison sat down heavily in the chair behind the table. His face was suddenly very lined and old.

"Reckon this means a killer's charge ag'in me," he said dully.

"Mebbe the coroner's jury will hold it death by natural causes," comforted Carter Renshaw.

"Not with Sime Price havin' the runnin' of things hereabouts," Allison said flatly. "He'll see to it a killin' charge is brought in."

The door opened, and lean old Sheriff Baylor entered the room.

"Just heard the bad news, Crane," he said to Allison. "That hellion *would* have to go and cash in. Bet yuh he did it out of pure spite."

"Wouldn't put it past him," agreed Allison, and moved a hand toward Hatfield. "Well, this cowboy here has somethin' to tell yuh. This is Sheriff Baylor, son. Don't believe I caught yore handle."

Hatfield supplied his name. The sheriff shook hands. Allison also introduced Renshaw to Hatfield. Both listened to Hatfield's accounts of the happenings of the night before.

"The same bunch that run off my cows, I bet," Renshaw declared. "Yuh didn't get a look at none of 'em, Hatfield?"

"Just a blur of faces by the lightning flash," the Lone Wolf replied. "Wasn't payin' much attention to faces, anyhow. I saw 'em go for their guns and was too busy gettin' out of line to notice anything else much. There were about six of 'em, I'd say."

"That's about the number we figgered to be in the bunch we trailed," commented Renshaw. "Uh-huh, it was the same bunch, yuh can lay to that. Well, I'm goin' over to the Rambler for a drink. If yuh learn anythin', Woll, let me know."

He left the sheriff's office and crossed the street to the saloon. Hatfield, watching his progress through the window, looked suddenly thoughtful and his black brows drew together slightly, in that characteristic gesture of his.

"Keep an eye on things here, Crane," the sheriff said to Allison. "I think I'll run up to Doc White's office and have a look at Grimes. Mebbe Doc can tell me somethin'."

Hatfield got to his feet.

"Mind if I go along, Sheriff?" he asked. "I sort of wrenched my left wrist last night when I went out of the hull. Would like to have the Doc put a bandage on it."

The sheriff nodded agreement and the two left the office together.

"See me before yuh head back for the spread, son," old Crane called after them.

Doc White was a typical frontier doctor of the old school. After meeting Hatfield and exchanging a few words with Baylor, he ushered them into the little inner room he used for emergency cases.

Ward Grimes' body lay on the bed, the face uncovered. His dead features were distorted, his glazed eyes bulging.

"Looks like he was hit mighty sudden and sorta choked to death," the sheriff commented.

"That's the way a thrombosis would act," decided the doctor. "His heart would be about the same as if it were suddenly paralyzed."

Hatfield and the sheriff approached the bed for a closer look at the dead man. As he leaned near, the Lone Wolf's sensitive nostrils quivered slightly. He drew a quick breath, leaned still nearer, and stared intently into the dead man's congested face. Abruptly he straightened up and shot a swift, all-embracing glance around the room. But he said nothing.

A LITTLE later, as Doc White was putting a tight bandage about his sinewy left wrist, he asked a rather peculiar question.

"Any place in town a feller could buy some fruit—peaches, say?"

"Yuh couldn't buy a peach in this town at this time of the year for love or money," Doc White grunted. "Reckon yuh could get some apples over to Vanstavern's grocery store, though."

While Sheriff Baylor and the doctor were discussing the disposal of Ward Grimes' body, Carter Renshaw entered.

"I forgot to mention it, Doc," he said, "but Grimes has a brother livin' in Austin. I have his address. S'pose I'd better notify him, hadn't I?"

"That's right, Cart," agreed the sheriff. "You tend to it, will yuh? We'll hang onto Ward's body until we get word from the brother."

Renshaw nodded and hurried out.

"I was wonderin' about Ward's place, the

Rambler," remarked the sheriff. "It's a valuable property."

"S'pose the brother will take over, or dispose of it," said Doc White. "Marshal of the Last Chance would buy it, I have a notion."

Hatfield had a word with Crane Allison before riding back to the Bar A ranchhouse. The old man seemed moody and depressed.

"I do feel sort of better though, knowin' that you will be lookin' after things, son," he confessed. "Yuh got a look about yuh of bein' able to handle anything that might come up."

Upon arriving at the ranchhouse, Hatfield had the unpleasant chore of telling Mary Allison what had occurred. The red-haired girl sat gazing straight in front of her.

"Poor Daddy," she said at length. "I'm afraid this will mean more trouble for him."

Hatfield smiled down at her from his great height.

"Ma'am," he said, "I don't figger yore dad has a thing to worry about."

Mary Allison glanced up quickly.

"What makes you say that?" she asked.

"I'm not ready to talk about it—yet," Hatfield told her, "but yuh can take my word for it."

The girl gazed at his sternly handsome face.

"I wonder," she said slowly, "if you always make people believe what you say. I can't imagine why you said that, but somehow I believe you have good reasons for saying it."

"I have," Hatfield said briefly. "Now s'pose yuh tell me a little about the spread and the things that need to be done."

"We'll ride over it tomorrow, together," she said. "What needs to be done most at present is get a shipping herd together. I have a note to meet the first of the month."

"Who holds the note?" Hatfield asked.

"The Lorenzo bank. Last year Dad was of the opinion that the spread needed restocking. There was a bad drought here the year before, so we borrowed money to buy a big herd. I think he was right, but then, of course, we didn't expect the trouble that has come to us since.

"My father is a good cowman, and so was my brother, and they ran the ranch well. Now, with both of them gone, things aren't so good. Almost all my riders are old men, and can't get around as they used to. They are loyal to me and do the best they can, but they were always used to having my father make decisions and direct all operations. None of them seems able to take hold, and while they are fond of me, I sense that they distrust a woman boss."

"Most old-timers do," Hatfield agreed. "But I've a notion things will change from now on."

The girl gave him another steady glance.

"Yes," she said, "I've a notion they will. . . ."

Before the following day's ride was over, Hatfield decided that the Bar A was a good spread but a hard one to work. A large portion of it was heavily grown with dagger, prickly pear and other similar chaparral. The whole west range, which shouldered against the hills, including grim Coffin Mountain, was a labyrinth of gorges and canyons.

"Fine places for cows to hole up in bad weather," he commented, "but an almighty tough chore to get them out. Plenty of prickly pear, I see. A desert country cow can chew enough water out of that to get by in dry spells. And the grass is good. Is there water in them canyons?"

"Yes, in most of them," Mary Allison said. "This is the best watered spread in this part of the country."

THEY were riding in a southerly direction at the moment, from the north range. Soon afterward they passed Coffin Mountain. Hatfield glanced up the craggy sides of the elevation.

"Folks ever camp out up there?" he asked.

The girl laughed. "I don't see why in the world anybody would. It's all rocks and thorny brush, with plenty of snakes and no water. Old-timers say that robber bands used to hide in the caves."

Hatfield nodded thoughtfully, still eyeing the crags and ledges. Then with a shrug of his broad shoulders, he turned his gaze south.

Some time later, from where they sat their horses on the crest of a rise, they could glimpse, some three miles farther on, the shimmer of the tossing waters of the bay, coldly gray under a cloudy sky. The expanse before them to the water's edge was drearily flat, utterly devoid of growth save for a sparse straggle of *sacaguista* grass. From the ragged escarpment on the west to the shadowy, rounded hills dimly seen in the east stretched the level monotony.

"This is the utterly worthless portion of our ranch," Mary told him. "Isn't it strange that nothing will grow here except that salt grass? There's not a bush or a tree to be

found anywhere."

Jim Hatfield who, before the killing of his father by wideloopers sent him into the Rangers, had had three years of training in a famous college of engineering, looked over the forbidding terrain with the eye of a geologist.

"Not so strange," he finally said. "This whole land was once under the sea. The land is impregnated with salt, so much so that nothing will grow in it. The sea retreated many, many years ago, and during the ages that have passed, a film of eroded top soil has built up to a depth sufficient to nourish the grass. But the covering of fertile soil is so thin that nothin' else can find root in it. Trees or shrubs drivin' their roots farther down come in contact with the salt-impregnated earth and can't live."

"So that's the reason," said Mary. "I suppose this part of the spread will always be worthless, then."

"Oh, it'll be all right after a while." Hatfield smiled. "A million or so years from now the chances are it'll be fine. That is, if the sea don't take a notion to come back up here some time to reclaim it.

"Yuh never can tell, though," he added. "Sometimes things that appear plumb worthless are mighty valuable. I've a notion the first folks to see the salt flats and lakes up north of El Paso figgered them to be mighty worthless. But the time came when a first-class little war was fought for control of 'em. And the Mexicans have been packing salt from there down into *manana* land for a long time, and making plenty of money out of it. No, yuh never can tell. Yuh say yuh own all this section down here? None of it belongs to the Double R?"

"No, the Double R holding doesn't extend this far south," Mary Allison told him. "Our spread is roughly in the shape of an L. We run north almost to Lorenzo, and include a width of about twelve miles between the Double R and the hills to the west. Or, rather, through the hills. They are part of our holding.

"From this place to the bay, the whole coastwise strip, about three miles in width, clear to the hills on the east, is part of the Bar A. The ranch was originally an old Spanish grant, you see. My grandfather, on my mother's side, obtained it from the Mexican owners, the Alvarez family, who also own much land in Mexico."

"Yore title is sound? There's been questions raised about them Spanish grants, you know."

"It was upheld by the courts, in my grandfather's time," Mary declared. "We have nothing to worry about on that score, or so I think." She added a trifle grimly, "But if things don't get any better, the Lorenzo bank will have to do the worrying, if any, about the title. A few more happenings like last night's and the bank will be in the cattle business."

"I've a notion things will work out," Hatfield said cheerfully. "They're always at their worst just before they get better."

"I hope you're right," Mary Allison said moodily. "They certainly have been bad enough of late."

CHAPTER VI

Camp in the Canyon

ON the following day, the Bar A outfit got busy assembling a shipping herd to replace the one stolen the night of Hatfield's arrival in the Nueces country. As Mary Allison had told him, all the Bar A riders, now that Chuck was incapacitated, were men advanced in years. Hatfield found that they were efficient, within their physical limitations, thoroughly conversant with the various ramifications of the cow business, but slow at their work, and decidedly old-fashioned in their notions.

And the spread was, as he had suspected, a hard one to work. The cows were largely *ladinos,* wild and rangy, and difficult to fog out of their hole-ups in the brush and in the canyons. Old Stiffy declared they had "come right up out of the Gulf of Mexico. That's what makes 'em so dad-burned salty!"

They were fat and sleek, however, in prime condition, and with plenty of meat on their bones. The kind of beefs buyers are glad to get. Hatfield was surprised at their excellence.

"The Old Man did a prime job of stockin' last year and the year before," Stiffy explained. "He brought in the best stuff he could buy. He allowed the day of the old maverickin' longhorn was about done, that this country would have to have a better breed of stock if it was goin' to compete with others in the open market. Reckon he was right about that—but he put the outfit had

in debt to do it.

"Him and Sime Price were on good terms, then, and he didn't have no trouble gettin' the money, and I reckon Price would have been easy on him if things didn't break just right for a spell, knowin' the Old Man's reputation as a square-shooter. But with Price plumb on the prod against the outfit, things is different. I reckon he ain't goin' to grant no extensions. Yeah, Miss Mary needs the money this herd will bring mighty bad."

Hatfield nodded thoughtfully, and redoubled his efforts to get a prime herd together.

And then, two days later, unexpected help came to the Bar A. Just as breakfast was over, a rotund, walrus-mustached individual rode up at the head of a dozen efficient-looking young hands.

"It's Slim Dryden, of the Lazy D, and his men!" Mary Allison exclaimed to Hatfield in surprise, as the cavalcade unforked before the ranchhouse. "The Lazy D is to the northwest of us. Their southeast corner touches our holdings. What in the world can Slim want so early in the morning?"

The question was answered shortly by the fat, jolly owner of the Lazy D.

"Howdy, everybody!" he bellowed, as he entered the room. "Understand yuh're gettin' a herd together, Mary. I finished my big roundup yesterday evenin'. Got my shippin' herd all bedded down up on the southeast range and ready to start to the railroad tomorrow mornin'. Me and the boys were at sort of loose ends, and figgered we might as well ride down here and lend yuh a hand."

"Slim" Dryden had a voice that seemed to come out of the caverns of the earth. But he also had a firm handclasp and an infectious grin that split his rubicund countenance from ear to ear. He shook hands with Hatfield, slapped old Stiffy on the back with a force that sent him into a fit of coughing, and roared for coffee. When he and his men had finished it, they went tearing down the trail in a fog of dust, headed for the south range, the most difficult to work.

"Seems to be a nice little feller," Hatfield commented.

"Uh-huh," Stiffy replied drily. "Mighty nice little feller. He's got ten notches on the handle of his gun. Looks fat and soft, but I've seen him jump three feet off the floor, standin' flat-footed, and kick a jigger in the jaw and hit him with both hands before he had time to fall. Uh-huh, Slim Dryden's a plumb nice little feller."

"But he's always doing things for people," Mary Allison said, "and doing them in a way that makes it seem it's the greatest fun in the world to do them."

"I've a notion it is, for him," Hatfield said.

Dryden and his hands were back at the ranchhouse just before sundown, chipper as a treeful of redbirds, and giving the general appearance of having just returned from a picnic rather than from a long day of the hardest kind of work.

"You jiggers head for our ranchhouse and get some shut-eye," Dryden told his men. "We want to start shovin' that herd to the railroad tomorrow. Get the wagon started by daylight and then ride down to meet us. I'm goin' to have supper here and then spend the night with the boys in that canyon mouth. We'll start the cows movin' as soon as it's light and pick you fellers up on the trail. We won't wait to eat first. Tell the cook to have us some chuck ready when we catch up with the wagon. All right—get goin'."

AFTER consuming an enormous meal, washed down with numerous cups of coffee, Dryden lighted a cigarette and got lithely to his feet.

"Got to be headin' up for the herd," he announced. "We'll drop around again in a couple days, Mary. Figger yuh ought to be about ready to shove yore cows along by then."

Jim Hatfield also got to his feet.

"I'll ride along with yuh a piece, if yuh don't mind," he said. "Would like to get a look at the country up that way."

"Fine!" applauded the ranch owner. "We can make it before dark, if we hustle."

Dryden chattered gaily as they rode, regaling Hatfield with accounts of the recent happenings.

"Don't know what the country's comin' to," he complained. "Used to be plumb peaceful hereabouts, and now things are happenin' so fast yuh can't keep track of 'em. Seem's Sime Price pulled a trigger and set 'em off when he began offerin' them cussed rewards. Of course there'd been some bank robberies before that—been havin' 'em all over Texas, I understand—but business didn't really pick up till right after pore Tom Allison got cashed in."

The sun was behind the western crags and the sky was flaming scarlet and gold when they turned from the trail and diagonaled

toward the hills.

"Another five minutes and we'll be there," said Dryden.

They passed through a couple of groves, rounded a shoulder of rock, and the canyon mouth in question lay before them. It was narrow and dark. The sides, more than a hundred feet in height, shot straight up from the ground. The small stream that Dryden said foamed from a crack in the end wall, flowed out of the gorge and turned sharply to the right.

Dryden gestured to the big herd bunched contentedly just inside the canyon mouth.

"Ain't she a beaut?" he said. "I ain't takin' no chances with them beefs. That's why I held 'em here in this hole instead of farther north. It's a plumb natural corral. Nobody could come at 'em except from the front, and they'd have to ride around in back of 'em before they could start 'em, and I reckon me and the boys would have somethin' to say about that."

"Suppose somebody was holed up in the canyon?" Hatfield suggested.

"Huh, nobody could get in there," Dryden scoffed. "The canyon is a box and the sides and end wall are straight up and down. A lizard would get dizzy tryin' to come down them rocks. The herd has been here all day and anybody that wanted to get in would have had to pass the boys. I've had four of my best hands in charge here since daylight. Nope, there's nothin' to worry about on that score."

They rode on, and shortly dismounted where the punchers had made their camp. Hatfield was introduced and shook hands all around. One of the hands began heating up some coffee.

Hatfield and Dryden stood on the stream bank and talked, the Ranger gazing thoughtfully toward where the grim bulk of Coffin Mountain shouldered against the sky. He turned to study the site of the camp, which was on a grassy flat in the canyon mouth. He glanced up the dark gorges.

Then suddenly his attention became fixed on the surface of the little stream that purled at their feet. After a moment's silence he turned to the ranch owner.

"Dryden," he said, "that's a mighty bad place to make camp. Suppose something happened to set them cows off. They'd high-tail right in this direction, and the camp would be right in their path."

"I put it here to keep 'em from strayin' out of the canyon," Dryden explained again. "They won't come past the fire. Nothin' to worry about on a night like this. Plumb still and quiet. If it was stormy it would be somethin' else again."

"Just the same," Hatfield said, "I figger yuh'd better move yore camp up onto that ledge under the cliff, seeing as I aim to spend the night with yuh."

"Yuh're loco—" Dryden began.

HE GLANCED up at the Lone Wolf, who let the full force of his level green eyes rest on the rancher's face.

"I figger yuh'd better move it," Hatfield repeated quietly.

Dryden stared at him. Then he shook his head in a bewildered fashion.

"Hatfield," he complained querulously, "yuh're a almighty funny jigger. A minute ago I'd have swore I wouldn't move that camp, but somehow or other yuh've got me feelin' I ought to do as yuh say. Yuh got any reason for figgerin' it ought to be moved?"

"Yes," Hatfield briefly replied, "I have."

Dryden started to speak, apparently thought better of it, and snorted instead.

"All right," he grumbled. "We'll move it, but I bet before mornin' yuh'll wish yuh was sleepin' down here on this soft grass instead of up on them hard rocks. I can stand it if you can. I got more cushionin' on my bones than you have on yores."

The Lazy D punchers also grumbled, but they were evidently not in the habit of questioning the orders of their fat boss.

"What about the fire?" one of them asked. "Shall we put it out?"

"Leave it alone," Hatfield said, and he added emphatically, "It'll be quite a spell before it burns down."

CHAPTER VII

Tangled Twine

GRUMBLING a little more, the men drank their coffee beside the fire, then scrambled up through the deepening darkness to the rocky bench under the cliff. The horses were rope-corralled beside a thicket just to the right of the canyon mouth.

The cowboys and Dryden spread their blankets on the softer spots of the rock and were soon fast asleep.

Hatfield also spread a blanket and lay down, but not to sleep. Half-reclining against a convenient boulder, he gazed over the rangeland to the south of the canyon, thinking deeply, and decidedly awake.

Several hours passed. The great clock in the sky wheeled westward. The stars burned golden, with no film of cloud to dim their lustre.

The night was very still, with only the occasional contented rumbling of the cattle to break the silence. Hatfield began to grow drowsy. Suddenly, however, his eyes opened wide.

Far to the south and high in the sky, a winking light had suddenly sprung into being. It glowed and swelled, flickered brightly for a few moments, then abruptly died to a glow and vanished.

"Now what in blazes?" he muttered, wide awake now. "It was on top of that darn mountain down there, I'll bet a peso. Just the same as the one I saw the night I rode into this part of the world."

He kept on staring into the south for some time, but there was no repetition of the strange light in the sky. He turned over onto his side and gazed into the blackness of the canyon to rest his strained eyes.

For fully another hour he lay quiet, listening to the heavy breathing of his companions. Then abruptly a sound came through the stillness, a sharp, metallic clashing that brought him bolt upright on his blanket. It was such a sound as is made by a horse's iron striking a stone. It seemed to come from the blackness of the canyon.

Hatfield sat listening intently, every nerve strung tight. The sound was not repeated. Then with paralyzing suddenness pandemonium broke loose in the black canyon. There was a roar of gunfire, a wild yelling, the snap and crackle of swung slickers, a drumroll of beating hoofs. Hatfield bounded to his feet.

The cattle were milling wildly and bellowing with fright. As the bewildering uproar behind them continued they fled madly down the canyon, their hoofs clashing on the stones, their terrified bawls adding to the turmoil.

Tense, alert, Hatfield watched the herd thunder past. Close on the heels of the panic-stricken cattle came shadowy horsemen, yelling and shooting. Hatfield's hands streaked down and up. Both guns let loose with a rattling crash.

The exultant yells of the rustlers changed to howls of surprise and alarm. There was a scream of pain that ended in a choking rattle. A man pitched headlong from his saddle. In the next breath another fell like a sack of old clothes.

Slim Dryden was out of his blankets, roaring profanity. Instantly he sized up the situation and began shooting. The Lazy D punchers, dazed and half awake, instinctively followed suit. Hatfield's guns were empty, and he grabbed up a rifle.

The demoralized wideloopers bulged out of the canyon mouth and, low in their saddles, sent their frantic horses skalleyhooting through the scattering cattle at top speed. In a moment they were fading into the distance and going like the wind. Hatfield sent his remaining shots after them and dropped the rifle. Then he began ejecting the spent shells from his guns and replacing them with fresh cartridges.

"S'pose somebody gets a fire goin' and some coffee heatin'," he remarked to his chattering companions. "I've a notion there won't be much more sleepin' hereabouts tonight."

"Uh-huh, and build it up here on the bench," said Slim Dryden. Significantly he added, "The one we had is tromped flat, along with everythin' else down on that grass flat!"

As soon as the fire was going good, they dragged the bodies of the slain rustlers into the circle of its light.

"Mean lookin' hellions, ain't they?" said Slim Dryden, bending over to peer into the contorted features. "The little one looks like he might have Injun blood."

"Ever see either of them before?" Hatfield asked.

Dryden and the hands shook their heads.

ONE of the dead men was small and dark, with straight black hair and black eyes, now glazed. His companion was lanky, a little above middle height, and had straw-colored hair and a straggling sandy mustache. Both wore ordinary range clothing, with nothing distinguishing about it.

"Scrub herd Border scum," grunted Slim Dryden.

Hatfield began turning out the pockets of the dead men. He uncovered a miscellany of odds and ends, but they were of little interest.

"What's that?" Dryden asked as the Ranger drew a round tin box from the taller rustler's pocket.

Hatfield turned the box over curiously in

his slim fingers.

"Snuff," he said. "A box of snuff. Some jiggers use it in place of eatin' tobacco."

"So I've heard," admitted Dryden, "but I never knowed a cowhand who did."

Hatfield nodded, but did not comment.

"The hosses these hellions rode ought to be around somewheres," said Dryden. "Mebbe there'll be a brand on 'em to tie these hombres up with somebody."

"Not likely." Hatfield shook his head. "Chances are they'll wear some loco Mexican brand or none at all."

"Hatfield," Dryden said suddenly, "how come yuh to figger somebody might be up in that canyon?"

Hatfield smiled down at him.

"Remember we was standin' on the crik bank," he said. "Well, I was looking down into the crik and I saw somethin' come floatin' along on top of the water. It was a cigarette butt. None of the boys were on the crik bank higher up at the time. So I figgered that butt must have come down the crik out of the canyon. It couldn't have come far, either. Otherwise the paper would have soaked off and it would have sunk. I figgered the only way it could have got into the water was by some careless gent up there a little ways flipping it into the crik after he'd finished his smoke. Right then was when I decided the flat was no place for a camp."

Dryden shook his head in wordless admiration.

"Them eyes of yores don't miss anything, do they!" he said. "Well, feller, I reckon we owe yuh plenty. If it hadn't been for you tanglin' their twine, right now me and the boys wouldn't be anything much but grease spots. I'm not the man to forget, feller."

"Dryden, yuh went out of yore way to lend somebody a helpin' hand yesterday," Hatfield said soberly. "Sometimes doin' things like that brings unexpected and unlooked-for pay."

Slim Dryden tugged at his mustache and was silent.

"Them hellions must have been holed up in that gulch all day yesterday," he observed a little later. "What's got me guessin', though, is how they knew we was goin' to corral that herd in this canyon last night. I shore didn't advertise it around."

"Have any visitors to yore spread of late?" Hatfield asked.

"Only fellers I know well," Dryden replied. "Night before last, old man Stevens, Sid Blake, John Bradley, Carter Renshaw, and Lester James were at the ranchhouse for a settin' of poker."

"Mebbe one of them stopped off at town for a drink and let a word drop that somebody overheard," suggested one of the cowboys.

"I reckon that was it," Dryden agreed.

Jim Hatfield looked thoughtful, but said nothing.

Long before the scattered herd was got together again, the rest of the Lazy D outfit foamed up, apprehensive and concerned. Their comments anent the night's happenings were vivid and profane. Admiring and approving glances were cast at Hatfield.

"Why'd yuh have to go and let Mary Allison hire this feller ahead of yuh, boss?" one demanded in injured tones.

"I've a notion Mary needs him worse'n I do," grunted Dryden. "I figger she's a good boss to work for, too."

"She's a heap easier on the eyes, anyhow,"

[*Turn page*]

A DARING RESCUE AGAINST ODDS!

When Captain Luke, dreaded outlaw chief, abducts Laurie Kennicutt from the Seven Eight Ranch, a proddy stranger comes to her aid—fighting the combined might of a lawless outfit in

STRANGER FROM NOWHERE

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commented one of the older hands. "Slim shore ain't gettin' any purtier as the years roll by."

"If I looked like you, yuh dried up scantlin', I'd go drown myself in a mud-hole!" bawled the indignant Dryden, amid the chuckles of his men.

After the herd got on its belated way to the railroad, Hatfield headed back for the Bar A. As he rode south he often gazed at the great black mass of Coffin Mountain looming against the sky.

"I've a notion that darn pile of rocks holds the key to all the ruckus-raising that's goin' on around here," he mused. "But I still can't figger why somebody keeps lightin' fires on top of it, and puttin' 'em out again before they get goin' good. . . ."

SEVERAL busy days followed on the Bar A. The shipping herd was almost ready to take the trail when Hatfield rode to town with Mary Allison to visit her father. While the girl was at the sheriff's office, Hatfield dropped into the Rambler for a drink and to look the place over.

Although the hour was early, the big saloon was fairly well filled with a typical cowtown crowd. Hatfield noted a quiet-looking, sinewy man of slightly above middle height standing at the far end of the bar. Apparently he was in charge of the establishment. He had hard black eyes, a thin-lipped mouth and a sallow face.

"That's Preston Grimes, the new boss," the bartender who served Hatfield remarked, noting the direction of his gaze. "Doesn't seem to be a bad feller. Not much of a talker. Different from his brother, Ward, that way. Ward was always gabbin' about somethin'. He showed up day before yesterday and took charge. Had papers and letters from a bank over in Louisiana to prove he was Ward's only brother. Judge Wheeler figgered he might as well take charge, seein' as there was nobody to run the place. Reckon the court will turn the property over to him, all right."

As Hatfield was sipping his drink, Carter Renshaw entered, accompanied by a beefy, red-faced man with a truculent eye. They did not pause at the bar but passed to a table where some cattlemen were playing poker, and sat in on the game.

"That's Carter Renshaw who just come in," observed the sociable drink juggler. "The feller with him is his foreman, Peasley Wallace, who used to own the Double R. Renshaw bought it from him. Cart is one of the up-and-comin' cowmen hereabouts. Figger he ain't goin' to get on with the new boss like he did with his brother, though.

"They had a sort of run-in yesterday. Ward Grimes always had a bottle of special stuff put away for Cart. Yesterday when Cart come in he asked for it. But the new boss told him he figgered to treat all his customers alike. Cart began to swell up, but Grimes just looked at him and Cart kind of pulled in his horns. He ain't the sort to take water, either."

Hatfield was something of the same opinion and regarded the quiet Preston Grimes with heightened interest. He noticed that Renshaw ignored the saloonkeeper when he came in. Wallace, however, bent a hostile stare in the man's direction.

"I've an idea that red-faced gent is good at gettin' his bristles up when he's had a snort or two," Hatfield told himself.

His surmise was strengthened by Peasley Wallace's conduct in the poker game. He was evidently losing, and just as evidently couldn't take it. His grumbling voice rose higher and higher. Also he drank constantly and his red face grew more flushed from his frequent potations.

There was a house dealer at the table, a quiet, elderly man with a soft, courteous voice. Once Hatfield heard him politely remonstrate with Wallace. He got an oath and a black scowl in reply.

Suddenly the matter seemed to come to a head. Wallace threw down his cards, cursed loudly, and surged to his feet. Carter Renshaw spoke to him, restrainingly, but Wallace paid him no heed. He shook his left fist in the dealer's face. His right hand dropped to his gun butt.

The dealer sat perfectly still with his hands spread out on the table. It was Preston Grimes who acted.

The new owner of the Rambler went across the floor like a windblown wraith, silently, smoothly, apparently without haste. His slim left hand, the fingers of which, Hatfield noted, were waxen and tapering, gripped Wallace on the shoulder and swung him around with effortless ease. The same slim left had flickered back to Grimes' left coat lapel.

With a roar, Wallace jerked his Colt. Then he froze, the barrel still pointing toward the floor. He was staring into the black muzzle of the short-barreled gun Grimes had flicked

from the shoulder holster under his left armpit. Grimes spoke, his voice flat and emotionless.

"Set down! If yuh can't carry yore likker any better than that, yuh won't get any more in here!"

CHAPTER VIII

Drygulched

FOR a moment Peasley Wallace glared into the saloonkeeper's unwinking black eyes. Then he mumbled something under his breath, shoved his gun back into its sheath and slumped into his chair. Grimes holstered his own weapon with effortless ease, turned on his heel and walked back to the bar.

"Salty, all right," Hatfield murmured, "and lightnin' fast. That iron 'just growed' in his hand. Wallace wouldn't have had a chance, no matter how hard he tried."

The incident appeared to have jolted much of the drunkenness out of the Double R foreman. His manner became more subdued and though he scowled blackly and mumbled to himself from time to time, he no longer raised his voice. Renshaw said something to him in reproving tones, but otherwise did not appear particularly concerned with the happening. The other players seemed amused, and rather pleased.

After a while a Mexican in range garb entered the saloon, glanced about, and made for Renshaw's table. He spoke to the ranch owner in Spanish. Renshaw replied in the same language. The Mexican nodded, and left the saloon.

"Felipe just came back from the railroad," Renshaw explained to his companions. "He told me we can't get cars placed for our shippin' herd till Friday. Reckon we won't start that herd on the trail tomorrow, after all. Reckon we'd better head back to the spread and line up the boys, Pease. Cash in and let's go."

The pair disposed of their chips and left the saloon together. Jim Hatfield thoughtfully watched them depart, the concentration furrow deep between his black brows. A few minutes later he paid for his drinks, nodded to the sociable barkeep, and also departed.

The sky was heavily overcast when Hatfield stepped from the saloon. By the time he reached the sheriff's office, where Mary Allison was waiting, the first drops of a brisk shower were spattering the dust of the street.

"It won't last, though," he told Mary, as he gazed through the streaming window panes. "The sky is getting light in the west already. We can head back for the spread in half an hour, if yuh're ready."

Crane Allison told Hatfield that a charge of killing had been filed against him and that he had been held without bail pending grand jury action.

"Don't let it worry yuh," the Ranger counseled. "Just sit tight and take it easy. We'll keep things movin' out to the spread till yuh get back on the job. We'll be ready to run that herd to the railroad in a couple days. Slim Dryden is lendin' a hand and he'll help us with the drive. Everything is goin' to work out."

Leaving Allison in a much better frame of mind, they headed back for the spread. The sky had cleared, and the low-lying sun was shining brightly.

For some miles after leaving the town, the trail wound over the level rangeland, with the loom of the hills on the right and at no great distance. Then, as it drew nearer Coffin Mountain, for a mile or more it followed the crest of a hogback ridge with steeply sloping, boulder-strewn and brush-grown sides.

Gradually, however, the ground on the left swelled upward until only the right-hand slope remained, with the trail edging along its lip.

To the left were now scattered groves and thickets. They were passing a densely grown clump when Hatfield, whose eyes constantly roved over the terrain, suddenly flung up his head, his hand dropping to his gun butt.

But even as he did, smoke spurted from the thicket and there was the ringing crack of a gunshot. Hatfield flung up his hands, reeled and fell sideward from his saddle. His body struck the lip of the trail and slid over it. Down the steep slope he rolled, amid a shower of loosened stones and sliding shale.

Helpless to retard his downward progress, he slipped and bounded. He went crashing through a bristle of brush, dropped six or seven feet sheer, and brought up in an earthy hollow with a bone-creaking jar. Through a wave of blackness that enveloped him, he dimly heard a terrified scream on the trail above. . . .

Moonlight was streaming through the tangle of branches over his head when Jim Hat-

field finally came back to his senses. For several minutes he lay perfectly still, staring dazedly at the filagree the branches made against the starry sky. Then recollection returned, and he strove to sit up.

A deadly nausea rushed over him and he slumped back, closing his eyes and fighting against the cloying sickness. It passed quickly, however, and he risked opening his eyes again.

There was a dull ache in his head and he was so sore all over that it was agony to move. But on examination, he found no limb that would not function, no joint that would not bend. He managed to stagger to his feet, clutching the low-growing branches for support. He stood there, weaving, then at last his head cleared and he glanced around.

HE was standing in a shallow hollow under a tangle of overhanging growth which obscured his view. He scrambled out of the depression and, glancing upward, could see the lip of the trail no great distance above.

"I shore come down fast," he muttered, gingerly exploring with his fingertips a shallow ragged furrow just below the hairline above his left temple.

The whole left side of his face was caked with dried blood. But from various symptoms, he quickly decided that the wound was slight.

"The slug hit me a smart crack on the head, though," he mused. "And if I hadn't seen the shine of the sun on the hellion's rifle barrel and thrown up my head, he would have drilled me dead center. Came mighty nigh it anyhow. Blazes! I wonder where is Mary?"

With quickening concern he scrambled up the slope to the trail. The full moon, high in the sky, made the scene as bright as day. Coffin Mountain loomed black and ominous, a few miles to the south. The silvery light softened and mellowed the tangle of thorny growth to the left. Ahead the trail stretched silent and deserted.

"The hellions must have done somethin' to her," the Ranger muttered apprehensively. "She's not the sort to sashay off and leave a jigger in the lurch. If she left here without tryin' to find out what had happened to me, she didn't leave of her own accord."

His eyes roved over the forbidding terrain, fearful of what he might see. But there was no sign of either the girl or her horse.

Abruptly a plaintive whinny sounded from somewhere nearby. Hatfield glanced around, pursed his lips and whistled softly. The whinny answered him and then Goldy sidled out of a thicket and came toward him with a questioning air.

"Might have known the sidewinders wouldn't have been able to drop a loop on you, feller," Hatfield said, thankfully stroking the sorrel's soft muzzle. "Mighty glad they didn't plug yuh before yuh got out of range. What happened to the girl, feller?"

Goldy blew softly into the Lone Wolf's cupped palm, but it was not an answer to the question.

"Well," Hatfield told him grimly, "I reckon it's up to you and me to find out. Thank the good Providence for that rain this afternoon. We ought to be able to track the hellions in this bright light."

Looping the sorrel's bridle over his arm, he set out down the trail, carefully scrutinizing the rain-softened surface.

"Here it is, feller," he exulted after only a short distance had been traversed. "Tracks of three hosses, plumb fresh. There must have been two of 'em, then. Ridin' three abreast after they got rid of me—Mary's hoss in the middle, and one of 'em on each side holdin' onto the bit straps. Let's go, feller. With any kind of luck we ought to have a showdown before daylight."

For several miles he followed the triple tracks. Coffin Mountain drew nearer and nearer. Finally, where the northern slope of the great hill began, Hatfield suddenly halted. The tracks he was following turned off to the right.

"I figgered as much!" he exclaimed. "They're headin' for that darn mountain. Now if the moon just don't get too low in the sky before we figger which way they went!"

The tracks ran west for half a mile or more, almost invisible to even the Lone Wolf's keen eyes where the grass grew, but plain and easy to follow across bare spots. Abruptly they turned south and began ascending the long, growth-bristling slope of the mountain. Soon Hatfield decided they followed a distinct trail that wound up the mountain, a trail that showed signs of considerable recent usage.

"Reckon you can take over for a spell, feller," he told the sorrel, and swung into saddle.

Up and up flowed the faint trail, little more than a game track, winding among the thorny growth and the black rocks. The moon slant-

ed down the western sky and long shadows began creeping down the slope.

It was an eerie, desolate terrain. More than once Hatfield heard the lethal buzz of a disturbed rattlesnake. Goldy snorted, and stepped gingerly. The click of his irons on the stones sounded disquietingly loud in the silent night.

"Reckon I'll have to hole you up somewheres and go it alone before long, feller," Hatfield told him, glancing upward.

The crest of the mountain was still considerably more than a mile distant, but shortly Hatfield pushed the sorrel into a dense thicket that flanked the trail and tied him there. Bestowing a pat on the glossy neck, he slid back to the trail and resumed the trip on foot.

He had reached the belt of shadow now, and his progress was slow. The ground was rough and rocky, and he had to be careful not to disturb loose stones that would roll down the slope and kick up a prodigious clatter.

Slowly and painfully he groped along, peering and listening. But no sound shattered the deathly silence, and he could see nothing save the encroaching growth that brandished crooked limbs against the sky and seemed to reach for him with clutching hands. The black rocks were stealthily crouching monsters waiting to pounce.

On he went, past trees that were not trees, past rocks that were not rocks, with the starry reaches of the sky above and the black mantle of the shadows below. He seemed to be swinging in a nameless void, between two fathomless immensities.

Gradually he developed an uncanny feeling that he was traveling in a circle and getting nowhere. The climbing trail was endless. The sinister growth crowded closer and closer. No sound blunted the sharp edge of the silence.

And then abruptly he heard sound ahead. He halted instantly and stood with every nerve tense, straining his ears to listen, peering into the blackness that pressed down upon him like a smothering blanket.

Again came the sound, not loud, but sharp and ringing. He catalogued it—the impatient stamp of a restless horse somewhere in the darkness ahead.

"Gettin' somewheres at last," he muttered, loosening his guns in their sheaths.

Slowly and with the greatest caution he crept forward. The trail appeared to have straightened out, but it was appreciably steeper. Then abruptly it leveled off and he saw a faint glow of light ahead, so faint that it would hardly have been discernible except to eyes that had been straining at utter darkness. It might have been nothing more than the phosphorescence rising from a heap of fungus, or even from a decaying animal.

Hatfield hesitated a moment, then continued his cautious advance. As he progressed, the light strengthened until it was a steady glow. Gradually it developed a symmetrical roundness. A few more minutes of slow creeping and he realized it was the glow seeping from the mouth of a lighted cave—a cave in the side of the mountain and only a little way below its crest.

The mouth of the cave was perhaps a hundred yards distant from where the Lone Wolf crouched. The approach to it was naked rock, with the growth falling steeply away on either hand.

His eyes fixed on the glowing circle, Hatfield did some hard and fast thinking. He felt sure that the men he had been trailing were holed up in the cave. Perhaps they were asleep. But then again they might be on watch just inside the entrance.

There was not a particle of cover between him and the cave mouth, and enough reflected moonlight fell upon the bare rock to reveal anything attempting to pass across its surface.

CHAPTER IX

Fire on the Mountain

JIM HATFIELD considered the situation. Before long the moon would be low in the sky and the darkness deeper. But he had a disquieting presentiment that to delay would be dangerous. For some moments he debated the matter with an earnestness that almost amounted to mental agony.

"I got a feelin' that them two hellions come up here to wait for somebody," he thought. "If they did, and I wait before jumpin' 'em, things are liable to be worse than they are now. With only two hellions to deal with, I got a chance, but if the rest of the gang shows up about the time I start movin', I'll be plumb out of luck. No, I'd better risk it right now." And he thought fervently as he made sure his

guns were in perfect working condition, "I only hope I haven't figgered wrong, and that there's a dozen or so of them holed up in there instead of two."

Setting the big sixes loosely in their sheaths, he drew a deep breath and raced across the bare space with swift, light steps. And as he reached the cave mouth, plunged into the lighted circle, two men who were crouched over a small fire, half-dozing, leaped erect with yelps of alarm.

They saw the tall form of the Lone Wolf looming before them and went for their guns. The cave fairly exploded with the roar of six-shooters.

Guns still up, Jim Hatfield peered through the smoke wreaths at the huddled forms of the two owlhoots lying beside the fire. A burning rasp along his ribs told where a bullet had seared his flesh, but otherwise he was untouched.

Satisfied that there was nothing further to fear from the drygulchers, he took a step forward.

"Mary!" he called. "Where are you?"

"Back here," the girl's voice answered. "Oh, Jim, is that you?"

She lay on a rough bunk built against the inner wall of the shallow cave, securely bound. Hatfield quickly cut the cords and chafed her numb wrists and ankles until she could stand.

"What happened?" he asked her.

"They brought me here, those two terrible men," she told him, in a shaking voice. "They threatened me with their guns when I tried to speak to them. They spoke to each other only in Spanish, which I do not understand. I don't know what they intended doing with me, but I was terribly frightened. I—I thought you were dead, when you went rolling down the slope."

"Just creased, and knocked out for a spell," Hatfield told her cheerfully. "I'm all right now."

He knelt to examine the dead owlhoots.

"Apache breeds, both of 'em, I'd say," he decided. He studied the bodies, arrived at a decision. "Mary," he said, "I'm goin' to drag these hellions out and pitch 'em down the slope into the brush, out of sight. Then when we leave here we'll take their hosses with us. That should puzzle anybody who comes looking for this pair. You wait here a minute."

He dragged the bodies out of the cave and hurled them down the steep, brush-grown slope. They crashed through the growth for some distance and vanished. Then he located their horses, tethered in the shelter of an overhang on the left side of the cave. The slope here was much gentler than on the right, though just as thickly grown with brush.

He returned to the girl, leading the horses.

"All right," he told her. "We'll trail our ropes away from here. Wait till I kick this fire out."

He stamped the dulling embers black, then led the way out of the cave. Just beyond the entrance, however, he halted.

"Listen!" he warned Mary.

From the darkness below came a faint, rhythmic clicking—the beat of horses' irons on the stones.

"Here come some more of the same sort," growled Hatfield. "Quick—around to the left and down into the brush. If the hosses will just keep still I figger we'll be all right. A good thing all the shootin' was inside the cave. If it had been outside, the chances are they'd have heard it."

They forced their way some distance down the slope and deep into the dense growth. With every nerve strung tensely they waited. Soon there was a clattering of hoofs on the stone above, then a rumble of harsh voices. Hatfield could not overhear what was said, but it seemed to him that the voices held querulous notes.

"Guess they're puzzled as to why that pair ain't there to meet them," Hatfield breathed to Mary. "Quiet! Somebody's comin' around this way."

A THUD of boot heels sounded above, then a scratching and scrambling as if somebody were climbing the steep slope that led to the mountain crest. The sounds ceased. Several minutes of silence followed, broken only by the indistinct grumble of voices in front of the cave.

Then suddenly a flickering glow appeared on the mountain top. Swiftly it grew to a leaping flame that soared high into the air. Against the fierce glow they could see the tall form of a man standing with his back to them.

For some minutes the fire pulsed and blazed. Then it quickly died to a flickering glow.

"All right!" a voice called from the mountain crest. "All right!" Everythin's all set."

It seemed to Hatfield that the harsh tones

had a familiar ring to them. He ardently wished he had managed to get a glimpse of the man's face.

The scraping and scrambling of his descent began. Somebody voiced a question that was unintelligible to the listeners in the brush as the man joined his companions. He grunted a reply that was also meaningless.

For some little time the group conversed in front of the cave. Then there was a jingle of bridle irons and a popping of saddle-leather as they mounted. Hoofs clicked across the rock and finally died away in the distance.

"We'll give them ten minutes to clear, then we'll head down the mountain, too," Hatfield whispered to Mary Allison.

Leading her horse and the two riderless mounts when the ten minutes had passed, he made his way down the dark slope to where he had cached Goldy. He led the sorrel out of the thicket, forked him, and they proceeded to the level prairie and the Pasajero Trail.

A couple of miles down the trail Hatfield got the rigs off the two owlhoot horses, concealed them under some brush and turned the animals loose.

"They can fend for themselves all right," he told Mary. "If any of that bunch does happen to run onto them, they'll be up in the air for fair. I figger there's goin' to be a lot of tall guessin' as to what became of the two hombres we left up in the brush. And I want to ask yuh to do somethin', Mary—don't say a word to anybody about what happened tonight."

"Of course I won't, if you say not to, Jim," she readily agreed, adding demurely: "If any of the boys are awake and see us ride in together at this time of night, I wonder what *they'll* wonder?"

"Tell 'em we've been doing the town together," Hatfield chuckled.

"That'll be fine," Mary agreed. "That is, if somebody doesn't mention what time we left town."

They laughed together, and let it go at that.

"Another mile and we'll be home," Hatfield remarked a little later. "Reckon a little shut-eye is in order. It's long past midnight."

"But something to eat first," declared Mary. "I'm starved."

"A cup of steamin' coffee would go mighty well about now," Hatfield agreed with enthusiasm. . . .

Late the following evening the Bar A had visitors. Old Man Stevens of the Circle S, which lay east of the Double R, rode up the Pasajero Trail. Stevens was tired, dusty, and in a bad temper. His hands, who rode with him, were as wrought up as he was.

"Fifty prime beefs from my south pasture," he declared wrathfully. "We trailed the sidewinders out onto the desert, and lost 'em there, of course. It beats me how them hellions get out there and then just naturally go up in smoke. Where do they go? Where do they take the cows they rustle? Across seventy miles of desert to Mexico? It just don't make sense. But where else could they go?"

"Mebbe them 'coasters' go right down into the bay under water, where they come from," suggested old Stiffy, who happened to be present.

"Shut up, yuh bat-eared pelican!" growled Stevens. "It ain't no jokin' matter. I tell yuh somethin's got to be done! If this keeps up, the whole kit and bilin' of us around here is goin' to go bust."

"What time did they run 'em off, do yuh figger?" asked Jim Hatfield.

"Sometime between midnight and mornin', I'd say, judging from the look of the tracks," Stevens replied.

Hatfield looked thoughtful, but said nothing more.

Aside from being bruised and sore all over from his wild roll down the slope, Hatfield was none the worse for the happenings of the night before. The bullet crease on his head was little more than a scratch, and caused him no inconvenience. With his hat on, it did not even show.

Mary Allison, also, with the elasticity of youth, had quickly thrown off the effects of her harrowing experience.

"Another day," Hatfield told her, "and we'll have that herd ready to roll."

"I certainly hope nothing happens to it," she said anxiously. "The money those cows will bring will just about enable us to meet the payment due on that note the bank holds. I hate to think what will happen if I fail to make that payment."

"You'll make it," Hatfield assured her grimly. "This time next week them cows will be rollin' east in the cars. Old Sime Price won't get his hooks in the Bar A this time."

On the morning of the second day after this conversation, the shipping herd was ready to take the trail. The Bar A outfit was augmented by nearly a dozen cowboys from the Lazy D, including rotund Slim Dryden, the owner.

"Don't figger to take any chances with this one," Dryden told Hatfield. "I figger the only way us fellers hereabouts can be safe is to band up together for our drives and such. Reckon no owlhoot outfit would take a chance on tacklin' a bunch like we got together right now, no matter how salty they might be."

"What we've got to worry about most is how much savvy they've got," Hatfield pointed out. "They've showed plenty of wrinkles on their horns of late. We've got to be on the lookout for tricks."

"We'll trick 'em!" growled Dryden. "Just let me line sights with one of them hellions! I'll fill him so full of holes he'll starve to death from leakin' out his vittles. All right, boys! Set her rollin'."

The herd did not travel by way of the Pasajero Trail, but north and east across the Double R and the Circle S, which was the more direct route to Casterville, the railroad shipping point.

Hatfield was trail boss. Dryden acted as his assistant. Near the head of the trudging column of cattle on either side of the herd rode the point men who piloted the cows in the direction they wished them to go. A third of the way back came the swing riders, where the herd would begin to bend in case of a change of course. Another third of the way back were the flank riders.

It was the duty of both swing and flank riders to block the cows from sideward wandering. Also, they had to drive off any foreign cattle that might try to join the herd in the course of its crossing the other spreads.

Bringing up the rear were the drag riders. These had the chore of hustling up the lazy cows that showed a tendency to lag, and to look after any that might suffer chance injury. They spent most of their time cursing the dusty and recalcitrant steers that wished to go somewhere else other than straight ahead. Further back was the remuda of spare horses in charge of a wrangler, and rearmost of all rumbled the chuckwagon driven by the cook.

Sometime during the afternoon, Hatfield and Dryden would ride on ahead of the herd to choose a suitable camping spot for the night. The chuckwagon would also forge ahead and follow up the trail boss so the cook could have supper ready for the hands by the time the herd was bedded down for the night.

Hatfield took the additional precaution of having outriders attend the herd. Two of these rode ahead of the herd and half a mile to one side, ranging the country, keeping a sharp lookout for anything that might appear suspicious. Two more paralleled the herd about midway back, and a final two rode some distance to the rear, keeping a watch on the back trail.

"Best to take no chances," Hatfield told Dryden. "And with yore men lendin' a hand, we got plenty of riders to do the thing right."

With this the Lazy D owner emphatically agreed.

"A feller who takes chances in this here country, the way things have been of late, needs his head examined," Dryden declared.

CHAPTER X

Trail Herd

ALL day, under a hazy sky, the herd rumbled along. The low hills to the east gradually drew near and, as the afternoon wore on, their rounded crests seemed sifted with violet dust. Far to the west, the grim battlements dominated by sinister Coffin Mountain looked dark and angry in the reddish light of the haze-filmed sun.

"Looks like we might have fallin' weather," growled Dryden, glancing at the ominous sky. "If there's one thing I don't like durin' a drive it's lightnin'. A herd sends up lots of heat, and heat attracts lightnin'. Sometimes durin' a thunder storm I take off my slicker, even if its rainin' hard, to let my body cool. Less chance of gettin' hit then. And I always like to wrap a rag around my guns if I can. I've knowed fellers to shuck their guns and spurs and leave 'em behind in a bad storm, but I never went that far."

Hatfield smiled slightly, knowing that Dryden was voicing superstitions common among old-time cowmen. That such beliefs were nothing but superstitions with no grounding of fact, he well knew. But he did not contradict the Lazy D owner, who was undoubtedly "sot in his ways" and difficult to change.

Late in the afternoon, when the sun was but a short distance above the western crags, the herd topped the crest of a long rise. Dryden who, with Hatfield, was riding near the head of the herd, gestured with his hand.

"Down there is the river we've got to cross," he observed. "And up there is the pass through the hills. We'll shove 'em across

the river and through the pass while it's still light. Just over the other side of the pass is a first-rate place to bed 'em down for the night."

Hatfield gazed in the direction the ranch owner indicated. A mile or so down the far side of the slope ran the river. It was fairly high and nearly two hundred yards in width at this point. The trail flowed up the steep far bank and on up the slope of the hills into a deep notch that split their rounded crests. The far bank was thickly covered with thorny growth that extended to the water's edge.

The only break in the dense bristle was where the trail left the river. The bank was steep, almost a bluff.

"That notch is the only way yuh can get through the hills," said Dryden. "No climbin' the bank any place else for miles either way. Whoop 'em up, boys! There ain't much light left, and it looks more all the time like it was goin' to storm."

With the cowboys urging the herd to greater speed, the cattle began streaming down the slope. They didn't like the looks of the swollen river, but with the point and swing riders prodding them, the leaders took to the water.

For nearly two-thirds of the way across the cows kept their footing. Then, as the water deepened, they began to swim. Tossing horns streaked across the yellow flood like meteors across a cloudy sky. The point men swam their horses on either side, whooping encouragement.

The leaders reached the bank, clambered up it, shaking the drops from their glistening hides in a rainbow of spray. They began streaming up the bank toward the notch. The main body of the herd, intent on keeping up with the leaders, redoubled their efforts.

"Not much current," Dryden observed to Hatfield. "Which is a mighty good thing, with only that narrow stretch where they can climb the bank. If they got swept downstream, they'd be goners."

More and more cattle lumbered up the bank. The leaders were already well up the slope toward the notch, quickening their pace as they sensed good grass on the far side of the pass. The point men drove their horses for the bank, whooping cheerily.

Their whoops changed to yells of alarm as from the dark mass of growth that fringed either side of the crossing came spurts of smoke. Even as the crack of the unseen rifles reached the watchers on the bank, one of the point men threw up his hands, reeled from saddle, and vanished beneath the surface of the yellow water. One glimpse they had of his body rolling over and over downstream, then he disappeared forever.

The second point rider screamed with pain, lurched, wavered, gripped the horn of his saddle with one hand, and frantically strove to turn his swimming horse. The swing riders had already got their horses' heads around and were surging back toward the near bank. After them came the point man, slumped forward on his horse's neck, but retaining his grip on the horn.

WITH yells of rage, the cowboys sent their horses racing toward the water's edge. They were met by a storm of bullets fired by the hidden riflemen.

One cowboy cried out as a slug ripped the top of his shoulder. Another threw a hand to his face, which was suddenly visored with scarlet.

"Back!" Jim Hatfield roared at them. "Back out of range! Yuh got no chance against them hellions holed up out of sight! Back!"

Howling curses, the hands obeyed. Hatfield, with slugs whining all about him, sat his horse on the edge of the bank until the last man, the wounded point rider, came clambering up the steep slope.

"Hang on with both hands," he told the injured man.

Reaching out he gripped the horse's bit strap. He whirled Goldy and they went racing across the prairie, slugs still whistling about their ears.

Far back up the slope, the blaspheming cowhands pulled their blowing horses to a halt. Gazing back over the stream, they saw the last of the herd clambering out of the water. And even as the last cow topped the bank, mounted men bulged out of the brush on either side of the trail. With snapping slickers and whirling quirts, they sent the herd bellowing up the slope.

"After the sidewinders!" howled Dryden. "Don't let 'em get away with it!"

"Wait!" roared Hatfield, as the punchers sent their horses skalleyhooting back down the slope.

Almost instantly his warning was justified. From the growth across the stream came spurts of smoke. Bullets whined about the approaching cowboys.

"Come back here!" Hatfield thundered to them. "They've left men holed up in the brush to hold the ford. Yuh can't get across!"

Reluctantly the enraged punchers obeyed. Hatfield half drew his heavy Winchester from where it snugged in the saddle-boot under his left thigh, then let it slide back into place.

"No use wastin' ammunition," he declared. "They're plumb out of range."

Seething with anger, the helpless outfit watched the last of the herd stream into the notch and vanish. Hatfield glanced at the sun, which was almost below the western crags.

"The rustlers who were left behind will stay there and hold the ford till it gets dark," he told Dryden. "Then they'll sneak away. What kind of country beyond that pass? Have they got a good chance to give us the slip?"

"A plumb good chance," growled the ranch-owner. "It's broken country over there, full of canyons and gulches, with trails nobody but the owlhoots know runnin' in every direction. We won't have the chance of a wax dog in Satan's fire runnin' 'em down in the dark. That herd's a goner!"

"Mebbe not," Hatfield quietly replied.

He glanced at the sky. The sun was behind the western hills and the shadows were deepening. Already they could barely discern the brush-grown far bank of the stream.

The wagon had joined them and the cook was adding his curses to those of the others.

"You two jiggers have the cook patch yuh up," Hatfield told the wounded punchers, whose hurts, he had already ascertained, were not serious. "As soon as it is good and dark, make camp here. You three stay with the wagon. Keep yore eyes peeled, and though I don't think it's liable to happen, if anybody comes across that river during the night, let 'em have it plenty. As soon as it's light, swim the wagon across. Take it through the notch and hold it at the campin' place over there."

He dismounted, leaned against one of the long poles which had been lashed to either side of the wagon to facilitate floating it across the stream, and rolled a cigarette.

"In ten minutes it'll be black dark," he told Dryden. "Then we're ridin'. Say, ain't there a trail over there that leads down to the bay?"

"Shore there is," Dryden said wonderingly. "How in blazes did yuh guess it? There's an old trail that ain't used any more—hasn't been for years. It comes out of a canyon down there to the south, less'n a mile from the water's edge."

Hatfield nodded. He smoked thoughtfully for some minutes, his gaze fixed on the far bank. Soon he could distinguish nothing beyond the hurrying water. The sun had gone out like a candle. The sky above was black, and there was an occasional mutter of thunder in the west.

"Time to ride," he told the hands. "Anybody watchin' across there can't see us now."

"Yuh figger yuh know which way them hellions went?" Dryden asked.

"I do," Hatfield said briefly.

"And we're goin' to chase after 'em, and run 'em down?"

Hatfield shook his head.

"The advantage would be all theirs then," he said. "They'll be on the lookout on the chance we may pick up their trail. No, we're ridin' south, on this side of the hills."

"On this side! What the—"

"Slim," Hatfield interrupted, "I'm playin' a hunch, and if it turns out to be a straight one, as I figger it will, we'll have them cows back in our hands before daylight. Let's go."

"It sounds loco to me," growled the Lazy D owner, "but mebbe yuh know what yuh're talkin' about. I'll string along with yuh."

THE punchers, who had dropped from their saddles and were lolling on the grass, smoking, mounted again. Following Hatfield's lead, they turned their horses' heads south.

Hatfield led the way, setting a swift pace. The going was good, despite the darkness, and they seldom had to slow down for rough stretches. The miles flowed away behind them as the horses slogged steadily ahead. The mounts had not been pushed during the day and were comparatively fresh.

From time to time Hatfield gazed steadily into the southwest. It must have been close to midnight and the mutter of thunder that promised rain was growing to a low rumble when he saw what he had expected, sooner or later, to see.

High in the sky appeared a sudden pinpoint of light. It pulsed and wavered, grew larger, flared brightly for a few moments, then swiftly died.

"Another fire on top of Coffin Mountain," he told himself. "Uh-huh—I'll bet my last peso I'm ridin' a straight hunch!"

None of the others had noticed the mysterious fire. Hatfield did not see fit to mention it.

The hills on their left were becoming lower as they rode on. Finally, a couple of hours or so after midnight, the hills had dwindled to a long slope running down to the level stretch that flanked the bay.

"We ought to be gettin' purty near in line with that canyon mouth yuh spoke of, hadn't we?" Hatfield asked Dryden.

"Another mile or so and we can cross the river, ride another mile, and be right at it," Dryden told him. "Do yuh figger that herd'll come down that trail, Jim?"

"That's right."

"But in the name of blue blazes, why?" sputtered Dryden. "They could run 'em on east and get over into the lake country and find places they could hole 'em up till they have a chance to dispose of 'em. By comin' down this way, they'd have to cross miles and miles of open rangeland to get to the desert. They'd be trailin' by daylight and stand a mighty good chance of bein' spotted. It just naturally don't make sense."

"A lot of things that have been happenin' hereabouts of late don't make sense," Hatfield countered grimly. "You pick the best place to ford the river, if yuh can see to do it. Gettin' darker all the time."

"We'll be climbin' another sag in a few minutes," Dryden said. "Down the other side of that we'll cut across the river. It's wide and shallow down here and easy to get over. I know this country here purty well, and I figger to go right."

They climbed the long slope, scudded down the far side, and turned sharply to the left.

"Thank all our lucky stars," Dryden exclaimed fervently, "the clouds are breakin' a mite and we'll get a little starshine!"

CHAPTER XI

Muy Malo Hombres

BEFORE long, the gleam of water showed directly ahead. Another moment and they were sloshing through the shallow stream. They rode due east, with the long slope of the hills close on their left. A mile or so farther on a dark opening yawned in the rise.

"There's the canyon mouth," Dryden said to Jim Hatfield. "The trail I was tellin' yuh about comes out of it."

Flanking the canyon mouth on either side was a straggle of brush.

"Here's where we hole up and wait," Hatfield told the men. "If I'm figgerin' right, the hellions will be along any time now."

But a weary hour of waiting followed, and nothing happened. A second hour was drawing to a close, and the only sound audible was the distant boom of the breakers where the waters of the bay washed the rocky shoreline. The punchers began to mutter among themselves in low tones. The horses were growing restless.

And then suddenly a faint murmur of sound came from the black canyon mouth. It swiftly grew in volume until the listeners recognized it to be the bleat and moan of tired, disgusted cattle. A barely audible clicking swelled to a low rumble of many hoofs.

"Get set," Hatfield told the cowboys grimly.

The noise of the approaching cattle increased until it vibrated the canyon walls. A dark mass appeared, dimly seen in the faint starlight. It rolled past with a clashing of horns and pounding of hoofs. On the heels of the churning herd came shadowy horsemen.

"Give it to 'em!" Jim Hatfield's voice rang out.

Instantly the fringe of brush flanking the canyon mouth blazed with gunfire. The cattle bellowed with fright and scattered wildly. Screams of pain and yells of terror filled the air. It was blind shooting in the almost pitch dark, but three saddles were emptied by that first roaring volley.

The owlhoots fired back wildly, howled, cursed, fought with their maddened horses. Then, as a deadly storm of lead continued to whistle around them, they wheeled their terrified mounts and went tearing back into the blackness of the canyon.

Hatfield sent Goldy surging forward. His whooping men raced after him. But before they reached the canyon mouth, they were engulfed by the churning herd. It took them minutes to untangle themselves.

"Hold it!" Hatfield shouted. "It's no use. The hellions have got too much of a start. They'll take to the brush when they hear us comin'. Let 'em go, and start getting these cows together before they break their necks or drown theirselves."

It took a lot of hard work to turn the stampeding herd and get it to milling. However, the cows were about worn out, and once they were well-massed they settled down to feeding.

"We'll hold them here till daylight," Hatfield said. "Then we'll run 'em back up that trail."

He turned and stared long and earnestly toward the bay, but nothing was visible save the phosphorescent gleam of the wave crests rolling in to break on the rocks.

"Any chance of them sidewinders comin' back?" Dryden wondered.

"Not them." Hatfield chuckled. "I figger they got a-plenty. Reckon this was the last thing they figgered to happen."

"And gettin' them cows back is the last thing I figgered to happen," grunted Dryden. "I still can't see how yuh thought it out."

"Let's have a look at the three hellions we downed," Hatfield suggested. "Might as well light a fire over there under the cliff, too. It's none too warm down here close to the water. We'll drag the bodies up to it and give 'em a once-over."

The general comment of the cowboys, after scanning the bodies of the slain wideloopers was:

"Never seen any of 'em before. Ornery lookin' hellions."

"Wait a minute, though," Slim Dryden suddenly exclaimed. "I have seen that lanky one some place. Let me see, now. I got it! I knowed I'd seen that sidewinder somewheres! I got him spotted now. He used to be a bartender over to Dynham. Worked for old Si Mason in his Dust Settler Saloon. Got hisself appointed deputy town marshal at Dynham. Went on a drunk a couple weeks ago and they fired him. Left town, I understand. Said he was goin' on a trip."

"Uh-huh, he's started on a long one, from the looks of him right now," growled one of Dryden's punchers. "Reckon he'll end up in a hotter climate than the Nueces country can dish out."

"Deputy town marshal at Dynham, eh?" Hatfield remarked. "That's the minin' town to the west of Lorenzo, ain't it?"

"That's right," Dryden agreed. "A purty salty pueblo, specially on paydays. Wouldn't be surprised if some more of this wideloopin' gang are from there. I don't spot nothin' familiar about the other two, though. Scrubby-lookin' horned toads. Nothin' about 'em to make 'em stand out in a crowd."

NOR did the pockets of the unsavory trio divulge anything of particular interest. They wore ordinary range garb.

Their horses were rounded up with considerable difficulty, and proved to be good enough stock but nothing exceptional. All three wore intricate Mexican brands that were not recognized by anybody present. The rigs were average, and showed signs of much use.

"It's an out-of-the-section outfit, all right, rangin' over here from some place," declared Dryden. "Mebbe from down *manana* way. Them other two hellions has that sort of look to me. Don't you think so, Jim?"

"More liable to be breeds with a considerable dash of Apache blood, I'd say," Hatfield said thoughtfully.

Taking turns at night-hawking, the cowboys managed to get some sleep around the fire. Daybreak found them on the move. They shoved the herd into the canyon and drove north, following the old trail that wound through the hills.

"She was used plenty once, a long, long time ago," Hatfield told Dryden.

"I been told the old freebooters who used to maverick around the bay made it, runnin' stuff they stole from the dons up to San Antonio," Dryden said. "As I understand it, them old fellers were a sort of water-goin' wideloopers. They handled a slick iron, all right, if the stories I've heard are anything like true."

"I've a notion they left some descendants who wear the same brand," Hatfield remarked cryptically.

Dryden stared at him questioningly, but the Lone Wolf did not see fit to amplify the remark.

Hatfield and Dryden rode ahead of the drive, watchful and alert, but they saw nothing suspicious.

"I don't much believe the hellions will try something else," said the Ranger, "but it's best not to take chances."

"Yuh're right," Dryden agreed. "I don't put nothin' past that outfit. They're *muy malo hombres*, all right."

Hatfield was ready to admit that the wideloopers were in truth "very bad men."

"But, like all the breed, they slip up on little things," he told his companions.

"Mebbe," Dryden said dubiously, "but I ain't seen no evidence of it so far. It was just a case of you outsmartin' the sidewinders, the way I see it. That trap they laid for us at

the river was a lulu. I thought I'd figgered on everythin', but that one was plumb new."

"Yes, they put one over on all of us there," Hatfield admitted. "We should have figgered that crossin' would be just the place for a drygulchin', but I'm darned if I know what we could have done about it, unless we'd sent men ahead to guard it the day before."

"I've a notion if yuh'd known about it, that is just what yuh would have done," Dryden said flatly. "I should have told yuh more about it."

"And I should have asked yuh more particulars about the route we'd travel," Hatfield said, shouldering his share of the blame. "Well, if it wasn't for that pore devil of a point man who rode his last river, there wouldn't have been much harm done."

"The hellions paid three for one for him," Dryden reminded grimly. "That ain't such a bad trade."

"One honest man is worth the whole ornery outfit," Hatfield said grimly.

Glancing at his companion, Dryden saw that Hatfield's green eyes had subtly changed color. They were icy gray now, the color of the cold waters of the bay beating the shoreline under a cloudy winter sky.

"And that makes it look to me like that outfit ain't really started payin' yet," Dryden told himself. "I'd rather have somethin' out of Tophet on my trail than this big jigger."

Late in the afternoon the herd reached the spot where the Casterville trail crossed the ancient track of the freebooters. They found the chuckwagon awaiting them. For some time the cook was the busiest man in the vicinity, and the famished cowboys did full justice to his "dishin's out."

That night the herd was bedded down where it had been planned for it the night before. By mid-afternoon of the following day it rolled into Casterville where it was speedily taken over by the buyer who awaited it, and payment collected.

"Reckon Miss Mary will be able to tangle old Sime Price's twine for him after all," Dryden observed, with satisfaction.

AS Hatfield and Dryden entered a restaurant for a bite to eat, the Ranger was surprised to encounter Carter Renshaw in company with Preston Grimes, the new owner of the Rambler Saloon. Both looked tired and dusty, and showed other signs of hard riding.

"My herd gets in tomorrow," Renshaw explained to Dryden. "Figgered I'd amble over and be here to meet it. Grimes come along with me. He's figgerin' on buyin' a ranch hereabouts if he can get one, and wants to get onto the business."

"Never was in the cattle business," Grimes amplified, "but it looks to me like a good investment."

"If it's run right, and yuh have some luck," grunted Dryden.

Hatfield studied the two men as they departed, Grimes striding lithely, and Renshaw keeping pace with him with his peculiar rolling gait.

"Looks like them hombres ain't on the prod against each other like they was at first," he remarked.

"Oh, I reckon they decided there wasn't no sense in pawin' the hackamore," Dryden said casually. "Cart always struck me as bein' level-headed, even though he has got a flashy temper, and reckon Grimes don't let personal feelin's stand in his way when a dollar is to be made. He's sort of got the look. Looks more like a gambler than anything else. Not the tinhorn sort, but the kind that handles big games where the stakes are high. Yeah, I've a notion he's shuffled a pasteboard or two in his time."

Hatfield had something of the same notion, and he was deeply thoughtful in the course of the long ride back to the Bar A ranchhouse.

CHAPTER XII

Barren Wasteland

IT was three days later when Hatfield and Mary Allison visited the Lorenzo bank. Old Sime Price received them in his private office. He glanced keenly at Hatfield when Mary introduced the Ranger as her foreman, but his greeting was cordial enough.

"We will handle the transaction this time," he said, when Mary took up the matter of the mortgage payment on the spread. "I am glad to say," he added, putting the fingertips of his wrinkled hands together and pursing his lips, "that the Lorenzo bank no longer owns the notes in question. We recently disposed of 'em, to a buyer who seems to think they're a better investment than we do."

"You sold the mortgage!" Mary exclaimed. "Who to?"

Price wagged his hard-looking head. "To a man who has not been here long, but who seems to want to get into the cattle business," he said. "We sold it to Preston Grimes, the new owner of the Rambler Saloon."

Mary Allison regarded him in stunned silence. Finally she drew a deep breath.

"And I suppose," she said bitterly, "that part of the payment was in the blood money Ward Grimes received for killing my brother."

Old Sime wagged his head again, and clucked disapprovingly.

"Now, Miss Mary," he protested, "yuh have no call to feel that way. After all, Ward Grimes only done his duty as a citizen. And paid for it with his life," he added grimly.

"It was murder, pure and simple!" the girl declared. "My brother never came into this bank to rob it, and you know it as well as I do!"

Price shifted uncomfortably in his chair, and it seemed to Hatfield that a disquieting expression showed in his filmy eyes.

"The coroner's jury exonerated Grimes," he said, almost defensively.

"I believe you influenced the jury," Mary flatly accused.

"Yuh're makin' a mighty serious charge there," Price expostulated.

"And before everything is finished, I'll make it stick!" she declared defiantly. "Oh, I don't mean to say that you deliberately told the jurymen what to do, but your opinion in the matter was well-known, and most everybody in this section is beholden to you or your bank in one way or another."

Sime Price's gaze shifted uneasily away from her steady eyes. He tugged at his low collar as if it were suddenly too tight.

"My conscience is clear," he muttered.

"But just the same, I think that you are learning that a dead man doesn't make a soft pillow at night," Mary Allison returned meaningly.

With difficulty Jim Hatfield suppressed a grin. Price was sweating now, and undoubtedly was not enjoying the interview.

"By the way," Hatfield remarked casually, speaking for the first time, "I heard a report about that killin' over at Dynham—the miner who was killed in an alley back of the bank there. The report said he had a half-stick of dynamite and a length of fuse on him. But it came out that no dynamite cap was found. Funny a feller would go to blow a bank vault and not take a cap along to explode the dynamite. Mighty careless of him."

"Mebbe he lost it," muttered Price.

"And the two Mexicans who were killed in front of the Armstrong bank," Hatfield pursued. "Yuh recollect they claimed to the marshal that they were waitin' to meet a man there? Well, not long after they were cashed in, a rancher showed up in town tryin' to locate a couple of Mexicans he aimed to hire to do some work on his spread. Wonder if them two bank robbers could have been the fellers he was lookin' for?"

"Yuh seem mighty well informed as to what's goin' on around here," Price growled, glaring at the Ranger.

"Oh, it's purty general talk," Hatfield deprecated. "In fact, I've heard folks wonderin' if there might not have been a mistake made in some of them reward killin's."

Old Sime's long, narrow face set in stubborn lines.

"I don't care to discuss the matter any further," he growled. "Yore receipt will be ready for yuh in a minute, Miss Mary. Yuh can make yore next payment—when yuh make it—to Preston Grimes. The bank has nothin' more to do with the business."

"Why wasn't I notified of the sale of the mortgage?" Mary asked.

"A mortgage of that nature is collateral," Price told her, uneasily. "It can be sold or transferred without the knowledge of the mortgagee. We would have got around to notifyin' yuh, sooner or later, as a matter of business courtesy, but we wasn't required to, under the law."

HATFIELD chuckled as he and Mary Allison left the bank together.

"I've a notion that old gent isn't as easy in his mind as he'd like to be," he remarked. "Looks like he's beginnin' to learn that folks who take the law into their own hands are shoulderin' a hefty load, and one that don't make for easy carryin'."

While Mary went to the sheriff's office to visit her father, Hatfield dropped into the Rambler Saloon. He noted that Preston Grimes was not in evidence at the end of the bar.

"Oh, he's out gallivantin' around somewheres," the sociable barkeep replied to Hatfield's question. "He does a heap of ridin' around. Says he's lookin' over rangeland hereabouts. Understand he has a hankerin' to buy a spread."

"Mebbe he's tryin' to get his brother's

death off his mind," Hatfield conjectured.

"Mebbe," the barkeep grunted, "but if he feels any too bad about Ward's passin' on, he shore don't show it. Seems to me that jigger ain't got no feelin's much of any kind. He's a cold proposition, or I never saw one. Different from Ward that way. Ward was sociable. He was salty, all right, but he got along with most everybody. That's what always made it seem so funny to me about him killin' young Tom Allison. Him and Tom got along.

"He said afterward that he didn't know it was Tom when he shot, and I believe he was tellin' the truth. Otherwise he wouldn't have shot him. He said he heard the cashier yell, and when he whirled around he just saw a feller at the window reachin' for a gun. Never occurred to him it was Allison, or anybody else he knew. Said he just throwed down on the jigger without hardly lookin'. Seems he ought to seen Tom go into the bank. He went in right after him. I know that for certain."

"How?" Hatfield asked, interested.

"It was like this," said the barkeep. "I recollect everythin' that happened that mornin'. Young Tom was in here—playin' poker over to that corner table. He went bust in the game and come over to the bar for a drink. He finished his drink and sidled down to the end of the bar where Ward Grimes was standin'. Him and Ward talked a minute, then they went into the back room together.

"A little bit later Ward came out and asked for the pen and ink and a blotter we keep in that drawer under the till in case somebody might want to write a letter or somethin', which don't often happen but does now and then. He took the stuff into the back room and in a minute or two Tom Allison comes out and heads for the door. Sort of weaves through folks out onto the street, I recollect. Must have been drunker than he looked.

"He'd hardly got outside before Ward comes out of the back room, puts the pen and ink in the drawer and picks up the sack we'd put the night's take in. Told me he was goin' over to the bank to deposit it. That's what makes me say he must have gone into the bank right behind Tom Allison. Must have seen him walkin' down the street. Reckon he was busy thinkin' about things and never noticed. If he had, I got a feelin' Tom Allison would be alive today and all this trouble wouldn't never busted loose."

Hatfield nodded his understanding, but did not comment.

"Yuh say yuh got that writin' material handy," he questioned a little later. "Got paper and envelopes, too? I'd like to write a letter myself."

"Shore," agreed the accommodating barkeep. "Go over to that vacant table in the corner."

For some time Hatfield busied himself at the table with pen and paper. Finally he addressed and sealed the envelope. Abruptly, while the barkeep was busy at the back bar, he got up and left the room. A few minutes later the drink juggler glanced around and noted the vacant table.

"Hey!" he called to a swamper. "That cowboy went off and left the pen and ink on the table. Bring 'em here before somebody tips over the bottle."

The swamper got the articles and passed them across the bar.

"Where's the blotter?" the bartender asked. "It's the only one we got."

"Didn't see no blotter," the swamper mumbled.

"Somebody must of picked it up," grunted the barkeep, stowing the pen and ink away. "We'll have to buy a new one."

That night, in his room at the Bar A ranchhouse, Jim Hatfield carefully examined the blotter in question. He crossed the room and held it before the mirror above the bureau. For some minutes he intently studied the reflection in the glass. Then, with an exclamation of satisfaction, he carefully stowed the blotter away.

"It's tying up," he muttered, an exultant glow in his green eyes. He pondered over the letter he had written and mailed, a letter addressed to Captain Bill McDowell, at Ranger Headquarters.

"Now if I just get the answer I'm expecting!" he mused. . . .

AS foreman of the Bar A spread, Hatfield could largely order his movements to suit himself. So the following day found him riding south across the range.

Where the growth thinned out and the wide stretch sparsely grown with salt grass began, he pulled Goldy to a halt, and for some time sat studying the dreary expanse. East and west stretched the flat monotony, hemmed in on either side by the hills. To the south were the tossing waters of the bay, edged by a ribbon of white that was the

breakers pounding the rocky coastline.

No animal moved over the level floor. A few gulls, soaring high overhead, were the only signs of life. The wind set up an eerie rustling in the tall grass, and to his ears came the low mutter of the distant breakers. Far to the northwest, Coffin Mountain glowered grim and ominous against the sky. Due west, where the hills fell away, was the desert, arid, unprofitable. Wtih the sand devils dancing across it and the sunlight shimmering its gray surface.

The whole vista was one of frank poverty, of a barren wasteland with nothing to justify its existence. But just the same, Hatfield felt sure that somewhere here was the key to the mystery he sought to solve.

Speaking to Goldy, he sent the sorrel slowly in the direction of the bay. Where wind and rain had washed away the thin skim of eroded topsoil, the earth beneath showed gray and lifeless, with a dusty look, as of desiccated bones.

These barren patches interested the Lone Wolf strangely. Finally he dismounted beside one, took out his knife and began digging into the gray surface, driving the blade deep into the earth until he had a considerable hole hollowed out.

He examined the dusty-looking gray soil with great care, sifting it through his hands, rubbing particles between his fingertips, even tasting it. At last he scooped up several handfuls from the bottom of the hole and stowed them in one of his saddlebags. He stared thoughtfully across the barren expanse.

"It's an arid country," he mused. "Always has been. There are weeks in summer when the Nueces is dry as a bone for miles. Rainfall is light, and there's no water flowin' down from the slopes of the hills to wash the soluble salts into the sea. Perfect conditions to encourage efflorescence. No water to cause crystallization, and the stuff changes to a powder on top of the salt, which sinks lower. Mebbe I'm wrong about it, but I don't think I am. Easy to find out for shore. These specimens go to the State University laboratory pronto!"

This was the kind of a diagnosis that an engineer would make, and Jim Hatfield had studied engineering. He knew what he was talking about. His sampling had been as thorough as possible, but he needed the services of a good laboratory before he could be completely sure of what he suspected.

CHAPTER XIII

Stage Holdup

REMOUNTING, the concentration furrow deep against his black brows, Jim Hatfield rode on to the water's edge.

Here he again sat his horse for some time, gazing over the sun-drenched bay, intently studying the coastline. He turned Goldy's head and rode westward along the shore, always keeping close to the water's edge.

Passing the southernmost slopes of the hills, he rode out onto the shimmering desolation of the desert. As he progressed, the heat sensibly increased. The wind stirred the powdery sand and swirled it aloft in choking clouds. Soon he and his horse were both thickly powdered with gray dust. The sun was a sullen orange ball shooting its baleful rays through the veil of dust and haze.

"We're taking a chance, feller," he told Goldy. "If it happens to start storming we mightn't last long."

For several miles the shoreline remained the same—jagged rocks with the surf pounding over them. Long bars extended out into the bay, over which the waves spouted geysers of foam.

As he progressed the wind dropped somewhat. The dust clouds settled. But high in the air, the finer particles still whirled and eddied. Far to the northeast he could dimly see the mighty bulk of Coffin Mountain looming like a gigantic fortress through the haze.

Gradually the shoreline changed. Smooth, sandy beaches took the places of rocks. The roar of the waters dulled to a mutter. The water changed color. Finally, several miles out on the desert, he came to a deep cove that curved into the shoreline. Here the water was a deeper blue, denoting considerable depth. The ground swelled upward on both sides, so that the cove was landlocked and sheltered. The waves ran in smoothly, with little sound.

Hatfield paused, sitting his golden horse and surveying the scene. He turned and gazed northeast. He could clearly see the mountain looming against the sky. He turned again, ran his eyes across the expanse of smooth, deep water.

"A perfect set-up," he mused, "with that

darned mountain in plain view. Hoss, I believe we've hit it. Well, this is a new wrinkle in widelooping. Everything is beginnin' to tie up fine. All we need is a good chance to twirl our loop, but gettin' that chance is goin' to be a considerable chore. This is goin' to take some thinkin' out too. . . . Well, guess we'd better be headin' for home. We've done all we can out here, and the wind is beginnin' to rise again."

He was glad indeed when he finally reached the end of the gray desolation and the fertile rangeland again rolled before him. He rode on east until he hit the Pasajero Trail and turned north, glancing from time to time at the ominous mountain shouldering the sky. . . .

No one was better pleased over the recovery of the widelooped Bar A herd than Sheriff Woll Baylor. He congratulated Hatfield warmly when the Ranger dropped in to see him a few days later.

"Yuh got the makin' of a good peace officer, son," he declared. "If yuh ever get tired of punchin' cows, let me know. I could use a smart, hustlin' deputy about yore size."

"I'll think it over," Hatfield agreed, smiling slightly. "By the way, Sheriff, wasn't that jigger that Slim Dryden recognized—that former deputy marshal at Dynham—the feller who collected a reward for killin' a miner he allowed was aimin' to blow the bank vault there?"

"By gosh, that's right!" exclaimed the sheriff. "Right after he got the reward money he went on a big drunk and they fired him. He sobered up a bit and left town. Went to the bad altogether, it looks like."

"Yeah, shore looks that way," Hatfield agreed. "Well, so long, Sheriff. I'm goin' down to the post office. Got a package I want to mail. Be seeing yuh. Tell Crane Allison hello for me when he wakes up."

"That hellion spends most of his time sleepin'," the sheriff growled in injured tones. "He's gettin' fat, and I'm wastin' away to a shadow. Some folks have all the luck!"

Hatfield repaired to the post office, where he mailed the sample of earth he had dug from the salt flats on the south Bar A range. After that he dropped in at the Rambler Saloon for a bite to eat.

Preston Grimes was at his accustomed place at the far end of the bar. Carter Renshaw and his foreman, Peasley Wallace, were playing poker at a nearby table. Renshaw nodded cordially to the Ranger. Preston Grimes also nodded, an inscrutable look in his black eyes, but Wallace cast a glowering glance in Hatfield's direction and immediately turned back to his cards.

"Mebbe that red-faced gent just naturally don't like anybody," the Lone Wolf thought, with a chuckle.

AS Hatfield stepped into the street, shortly afterward, his attention was attracted by a clatter of fast hoofs. Glancing up the street he saw a sweat-streaked horse foaming toward him. It bore no saddle, and the man who forked its bare back controlled it by means of a broken strap secured to one bit iron.

The man himself was in a condition to attract considerable attention. He was wild-eyed and haggard. His face was smeared with blood and his left arm swung limply from the shoulder.

Reeling and swaying, he flashed past Hatfield and hauled his horse to a skating halt in front of the sheriff's office. He slumped off the animal's back like a sack of old clothes, gripping the horse's mane for support, steadied himself an instant, then floundered up the wooden steps and through the door.

Hatfield headed for the sheriff's office at a fast pace. He entered just in time to hear the man, who was slumped in a chair, gasping out his story. The Ranger, gathering it, placed it in sequence:

The Casterville stage rolled out of Dynham at eight o'clock in the morning. It would take most of the day to cover the forty-odd miles from Dynham to the railroad town. Dynham, preeminently a mining community, perched on a shelf of the range of hills that flowed northward, west of Lorenzo. A long, irregular spur of the hills fanged eastward for nearly twenty miles, falling away to slopes and rolling rangeland just north of Lorenzo.

Out of Dynham the trail ran through the hills, which were steep and rocky and thickly covered with growth. Chaparral consisting largely of mesquite, prickly pear and dagger predominated, but flanking the trail at times were considerable stands of fairly heavy timber. The trail, boulder-strewn and rutted, followed the path of least resistance, and took its time getting through the hills.

"A cow wanderin' around must have started the dad-blamed thing," disgusted stage drivers and teamsters were wont to declare

as they negotiated the innumerable bends and zigzags.

Old Owen Hartsook, the driver, perched comfortably on his high seat and handled his six mettlesome horses with expert ease. Beside him sat his shotgun guard, a rifle within easy reach, a sawed-off shotgun resting across his knees. For the stage at times carried valuable mail and express and a guard always rode attendance.

There were no passengers this particular trip. The mail sacks and a negligible amount of express matter were locked inside the body.

As a matter of long habit, Hartsook and the guard kept a close eye on their surroundings as the coach wound its way through the hills. Hartsook's old .44 was within easy reach of his hand, and he knew how to use it. Both he and his guard had a reputation of being "plumb salty hombres," and the stage had never been held up.

But the chief reason it remained unmolested, most folks said, was because it wasn't really worth bothering with. It was always highly problematical whether the mail and express it carried was of any particular value, and only a trusted few knew of what else the coach packed on occasion, and which was never in evidence or open to the glance of a casual observer.

The coach climbed a long slope, paused at the crest to breathe the horses, then rolled smartly down the opposite sag. Hartsook kept a tight grip on the reins.

The guard cradled his shotgun across his lap and rolled a cigarette. He was always glad to get through the dense stand of thicket that hemmed the whole length of the trail up the slope.

Down the sag and across the level the growth was sparse, affording little concealment. Tall trees stood at intervals, spreading their giant boughs across the trail. The sunlight made green and gold shadows on the gray dust and the air was full of the musical sough of leaves and branches in a brisk wind.

The stage reached the level ground. Old Hartsook eased off on his team and relaxed on his perch. The wheels clashed and clattered over the boulders that studded the surface of the rutted track.

Hartsook opened his lips to make some inconsequential remark, but the guard never heard what he had to say. For the driver's voice was drowned in an explosive crackling followed by a rushing roar. Hartsook yelled in terror and threw up his arm to shield his face.

On the right-hand side of the trail a great tree leaned out of the perpendicular, seemed to hang in mid-air for a paralyzed second. Then it rushed downward with a mighty splitting and crashing. With a rending boom, the huge trunk struck the body of the coach, crushing it like an eggshell beneath a hammer. The wheels flew off, the body thudded to the ground.

The horses snorted with terror and plunged against the breast bands. Down went one of the leaders in a flurry of kicking hoofs. In an instant the team was in a mad tangle. But the stout chain traces resisted, and they were held to the wrecked coach, floundering and screaming.

OLD Owen Hartsook, slashed across the face and head by a flailing branch, was hurled to the groud and lay with arms widespread, his face a bloody mass. The guard was also unseated by the shock. He landed on hands and knees and strove to rise.

From a bristle of growth behind the fallen tree surged a half-dozen men, their faces covered by black handkerchiefs cut with eyeholes. They rushed toward the stage. One flung up a gun and shot the guard squarely between the eyes. He slumped to the ground and lay still.

Another lined sights with the fallen driver, but did not pull trigger, after a glance at his motionless form and blood-drenched face.

"He's done for," he growled. "No sense in wastin' a cartridge. Smash them doors open and get to work."

Several of the men crowding behind him bore axes. With a few swinging blows they smashed in one of the doors. Then without an instant's hesitation they went to work on the floor boards of the coach, cutting and hacking with the axes.

The floor boards were an inch of seasoned oak, and resisted the assault. Also, the huge tree trunk, smashed clear through the roof and upper sides of the coach hampered their efforts. Swearing and sweating, they slashed and pounded at the heavy boards. Finally one splintered. Another sagged inward, cut clear through.

A man with a crowbar shoved his way into the coach, thrust the end of the bar through an opening and heaved mightily. The board creaked, groaned, gave with a sharp splintering. A dark opening yawned.

"Here it is!" whooped the man who wielded the bar. "Hit her a couple more licks and let me pry another plank loose. That's done it. Stand by to take the stuff."

Thrusting his arms through the opening, grunting and panting with the strain, he hauled forth a ponderous ingot, frosty white in appearance. It was a silver brick from the Dynham silver mines, with a gold content of almost one-fourth its weight. Another and another followed.

More floor boards were ripped loose, laying bare the secret compartment in which was snugged the treasure-trove of the coach. More and more ingots came forth.

A string of pack mules were led out of the brush, the ingots loaded into the rawhide aparejos on their backs.

"That's the crop," called the masked man who directed operations. "Start 'em movin'. We haven't any time to waste."

Horses were led out of the brush. Without a glance at the still forms in the dust, the owlhoots mounted and, driving the loaded mules before them, headed south over a faint track that wound through the growth.

The stage, with its trembling horses huddled in their tangled harness, lay like a squashed bug under the ponderous trunk of the fallen tree.

CHAPTER XIV

Robbers' Roost

THEN old Owen Hartsook continued his story, about his personal part in it.

"They figgered I was done for," he said, "and I reckon I looked it, all covered with blood, like I was. Anyhow, they didn't come over to finish me. But I didn't even lose my senses. Reckon the pain in my busted arm was too sharp at first, and kept me awake. I lay there with a slit between my eyelids and saw everythin' that went on.

"What I can't figger is how them hellions knew we were carryin' that metal. Not a half-dozen folks was supposed to know about it. The stage was loaded at night. Yesterday the wagon was supposed to be packin' the monthly cleanup rolled out of Dynham with guards and everythin'. She was loaded, too—with bars of lead—and anybody snoopin' around could of seen the loadin' takin' place.

"But them hellions wasn't fooled a mite. They went right for that false bottom in the coach. Knowed right where to look. There was a leak some place, all right, and there's goin' to be ructions about it. That haul run close to forty thousand dollars, I'd say."

The sheriff swore wearily. Jim Hatfield, who had listened intently to the driver's story, spoke up then.

"What was the weight of the metal they got?" he asked.

"There was twelve fifty-pound bars," the old driver told him.

"Six hundred pounds," Hatfield translated. "How many mules did they have?"

"I saw four," said Hartsook.

"A hundred and fifty pounds per mule," Hatfield mused. "That's a heavy load to pack over hill trails. They couldn't make much speed."

"They got a good start, though," said Hartsook. "After they hightailed I did pass out. Was out for hours, and then I had to ride the fifteen miles here. Yeah, they got a plumb good start."

"We're ridin' up there pronto," the sheriff declared. "How many of the sidewinders did yuh say there was, Owen?"

"I counted seven," the driver said. "There might of been more back in the brush, but I don't think so. I reckon seven was the right number, all right. There was three big tall ones and four other sort of medium-sized."

"They all wore masks?"

"That's right. Their faces was plumb covered up."

A number of men, attracted by Hartsook's dramatic arrival, had crowded into the sheriff's office. Among them were Baylor's two deputies.

"I'd like you to go along, too, if you will, Jim," the sheriff said to Hatfield. "And I'll swear you in, too, Blaine Evans, and you, McGregor. You three, with Pete and Cary, ought to be enough to handle the seven if we run 'em down. I always favor small posses. Yuh can travel better that way, so long as yuh got jiggers yuh can depend on. Yeah, six of us will be plenty. Get the rigs on yore cayuses and let's hit the trail. Not over much daylight left. Get goin'! Some of you fellers take Hartsook here over to Doc's office and get him patched up."

In not more than ten minutes, the sheriff, grim of face and hard of eye, thundered out

of town at the head of his posse.

The fifteen miles to the scene of the holdup were covered at a fast clip, despite the roughness of the road. Considerably less than two hours had passed when the possemen pulled their blowing horses to a halt beside the wrecked stage.

The dead guard lay where he had fallen, his blood-smeared face buried in the dust. Hartsook had cut the horses loose before riding for town and they were grazing near the trail.

Hatfield examined the fallen tree. Quickly he discovered a stout rope tied high up on the trunk and dangling through the welter of splintered branches.

"They cut the trunk almost through," he told Sheriff Baylor. "From the look of he stump, I figger the tree naturally leaned toward the trail. They anchored it with the rope before they started chopping. Then when the stage came along, they cut the rope and down she came. Took some careful figgering. They must have watched the coach go by a number of times and figgered just how fast it would be liable to travel. An outfit with plenty of savvy, all right.

"Here's where they trailed into the brush. Not much of a track, but on this soft ground we ought to be able to follow them. Let's go, gents! Goin' to be dark before long."

For several miles they had little trouble following the track of the heavily laden mules. But as the sun hovered over the western crags, they crossed a long ridge and their troubles began.

BEYOND was a series of valleys, running this way and that. The soil was hard and stony, and hoof marks became increasingly scarce. There was no way of telling just which one of the valleys the fugitives might have followed. The sun sank behind the hills and the blue gloom of the dusk filled the depressions. Finally Sheriff Baylor pulled up, growling an oath.

"It's no use," he said. "The hellions might have turned in any direction here. It begins to look like they've give us the slip."

Jim Hatfield was studying the forbidding terrain.

"Sheriff," he said, "you know the country. Is there a way to get to the Pasajero Trail from here?"

"I reckon I can figger a way," Baylor said. "Why?"

"Because," Hatfield said slowly, "I got a hunch I know where them owlhoots are headin'. If my hunch is straight, we'll have them and the metal corralled before mornin'."

"Yuh really figger yuh can lead us to their hole-up?" Baylor exclaimed excitedly.

"Yes," said Hatfield, "I think I can. They've got to hole that metal up somewheres for a while. It takes some arrangin' to get rid of a haul like that. Yuh can't just walk up to an assay office and sell the stuff. If it was loose dust or nugget gold, it would be different. But molded bars could only come from a stamp mill cleanup, and an assay office would want an explanation as to where it come from, and its history. They can get rid of it, all right, but only with considerable connivin'. So I figger they'll hold it under cover for a while. The report will go out on that holdup, and every legitimate source of disposal will be on the lookout for it."

"All right," said the sheriff. "Yuh're the bully boy with the glass eye from here on. Let's go!"

Following the sheriff's directions, the posse turned and retraced their way for a mile or more. They scrambled their horses down a long slope that led to the floor of the canyon that ran due east. Through this they stumbled in almost total darkness, and finally reached the open rangeland. The sheriff led the way on a long diagonal and, glimmering wanly in the starlight, the Pasajero lay before them. Hatfield turned Goldy south and they rode swiftly along the trail, toward the dark bulk of Coffin Mountain looming against the sky.

They crossed the hogback where Hatfield had been drygulched. The Ranger intently scanned the vista ahead and finally spotted where he had turned off, following the trail of the two owlhoots who had carried off Mary Allison.

"Keep yore eyes skinned and yore ears open from here on," he cautioned the others. "It's a salty outfit with plenty of savvy. If they get the drop on us we won't enjoy it. I figger it's goin' to be a case of shoot first and ask questions afterward."

Soon they were following the narrow, brush-flanked tracks that led up the mountain. Hatfield used the horses as long as he deemed it safe to do so. Then he dismounted his followers and led the way on foot.

After what seemed an endless period of climbing the steep trail, slowly and cautiously, with the greatest care not to dis-

lodge a loose boulder or snap a twig, they reached a point where they were able to peer over the crest of the slope and across the flat expanse of rock. A glow of light met their gaze.

"Right!" Hatfield breathed exultantly. "They're in the cave. Now to get to them before they line sights with us."

Crouched in the growth at the lip of the rise, the possemen studied the terrain. Hatfield had little hope of catching the occupants of the cave drowsing this time. They had doubtless arrived at their hole-up but a short time before. As he hesitated what course to pursue, there drifted to his nostrils the aroma of boiling coffee.

"The hellions are cooking up chuck," he breathed to his companions. "That means they're wide awake. They'll spot us shore if we try to slide across that naked rock. I figger our only chance is to sneak around to the left through the brush and come at 'em that way. If we make a racket doin' it, they'll be ready and waitin' for us. Take yore time, and don't make any slips."

With the silent stealth of an Indian, he led the way into the brush. The gloom was intense, the going difficult. A great part of the way the men crawled on hands and knees between the stems of the chaparral, and their progress was slow.

OCCASIONALLY, through breaks in the growth, they could see the dark crest of the mountain looming starkly against the star-burned sky. Now and then they heard the impatient stamp of horses tethered in the shelter of the overhang, and once the raucous bray of a mule shattered the silence and set their pulses hammering with the unexpectedness of the sound.

"About time to head up the slope," Hatfield whispered at last. "Get together under the overhang, where the hosses are tied, then around the bulge and into the cave with a rush. Guns out and ready. We'll give 'em a chance. If they won't take it, it's up to them to take somethin' else!"

Slowly, and with the utmost caution, the posse climbed the slope. One by one they slid from the growth and gathered in the darkness under the overhang.

"Get set," Hatfield breathed. "Let's go!"

At a swift run he led the way around the cliff. He was inside the cave, the sheriff and the others close at his heels, before its occupants had any notion of what was happening.

"In the name of the State of Texas!" thundered Sheriff Baylor. "Reach for the sky! Yuh're covered!"

Hardly had the words left his lips before Jim Hatfield was shooting with both hands. The four men squatted beside the fire had leaped to their feet with yelps of alarm, guns out and blazing.

Hatfield saw the flash of the owlhoots' shots, felt his own Colts bucking in his hands. Lead was whining and hissing around him. A man behind him gave a cry of pain. The reports of his companions' guns roared in his ears.

In breathless seconds it was over. The four owlhoots lay sprawled on the floor of the cave, dead or dying. One posseman had a punctured upper arm. Another was bleeding from a slight flesh wound in his hip.

Hatfield stirred the fire to a brighter blaze. The dead men were dragged within the circle of its light and carefully examined. They were swarthy men, all of them. One was almost black in coloring, with a broad face, a cruel gash of a mouth, and high cheekbones. His hair was lank, and dead black.

"Breeds," remarked one of the deputies. "They got plenty of Injun blood. I'd say this chunky one is a almost pure-blood 'Patchy."

"Apache blood in all of 'em, from the look of 'em," Hatfield supplemented.

Sheriff Baylor tugged thoughtfully at his mustache.

"Funny to find 'Patchys way over here," he remarked. "They belong in the mountain country over west. Can't say as I ever recollect seein' one here in the Nueces country before. Now if this was the Guadalupe, or even the Big Bend, it wouldn't be so surprisin'."

"Everything seems to be driftin' into the Nueces of late," a posseman interrupted, in disgusted tones. "Most any day now I figger to see some of them there Inca fellers I read about once to be droppin' in from South America."

"Yuh might not be so far wrong at that," Hatfield remarked cryptically.

"You mean to tell me that I'm goin' to find 'em?" the posseman demanded.

"Well," Jim Hatfield drawled, "I won't say for certain that yuh will, but don't be surprised at anything from now on."

"Here's the metal stacked over in this corner!" exclaimed another posseman, who had been nosing about."

CHAPTER XV

The Lone Wolf!

LAWMAN Baylor contemplated the recovered ingots with satisfaction.

"Yuh know," he observed suddenly, "I've a notion them jiggers figgered to move this stuff off somewheres else in a jiffy. Otherwise they would have buried it here or hid it in some way. They wouldn't have left it stacked here with the aparejos alongside it, like they was all set to load it up again. What do you think, Jim?"

"Seems to make sense," Hatfield agreed.

"Well, let's get it set to pack back to town," said the sheriff. "We'll load these hellions onto their hosses and take them along, too. The coroner will want to set on 'em, I reckon. We'll put 'em on exhibition and mebbe somebody will recognize 'em and give us somethin' to go on toward runnin' down the rest of the outfit. Owen Hartsook said there was seven of 'em altogether. That means three more of the sidewinders are maverickin' around somewhere yet, and there may be more. How's yore arm, Pete?"

"It'll do, now it's tied up," returned the wounded deputy. "Hurts some, but I reckon I can stand it. I'm fit to ride."

"Me, too," grunted the other wounded posseman, "but I shore wish I had a cushion to tie onto my saddle."

"Uh-huh, yuh got plugged in the part yuh use most," the sheriff replied. "Well, yuh can take yore vittles from the mantelpiece for a spell. Do yuh good to stand up a little."

The mules and the owlhoots' horses were led from the overhang and loaded up. With a last glance around, the posse set off down the mountain. They reached the Pasajero without mishap and headed for town.

As Sheriff Baylor and Hatfield rode together to the rear of the others, the lawman asked a question.

"How come yuh to figger where them hellions would pack the stuff, Jim, and how come yuh to know how to get there?"

Hatfield briefly recounted the happenings of the day he had been drygulched on the trail and Mary Allison carried off to the cave.

"And I believe," he concluded, "that if I had really been done in under that bush, like they figgered me to be, Mary Allison would never have been seen or heard of again."

"Yuh mean yuh figger they would have killed a girl?" the sheriff asked incredulously.

"Either that or carried her off somewheres," Hatfield said grimly.

"They must have figgered on cashin' her in," decided the sheriff. "They couldn't have kept her hid."

"There are other countries besides Texas," Hatfield reminded.

"But gettin' her out of the country would have been some chore," the sheriff protested. "They couldn't expect to pack her down to *manana* land without somebody knowin' about it. They would have had the whole state up and pawin' sand. Every peace officer in Texas would have been on their tail."

"Not necessarily," Hatfield disagreed. "Yuh see, we would have disappeared together."

The sheriff stared, then nodded his understanding.

"Yuh mean folks would have thought you two went off together. Well"—he glanced at the Lone Wolf's sternly handsome face—"that wouldn't have been such a far-fetched notion. Mary is a mighty purty gal, and a thing like that has happened before. Sort of what folks expect, and like to figger happens, too—cowboy and purty gal ridin' off together.

"Yeah, I reckon that's just what many folks would have opined was what happened, Jim," he repeated, "It looks like we're up against a mighty salty outfit, with plenty of savvy."

"Yes, they've got plenty of wrinkles on their horns, and they won't stop at anything," Hatfield agreed. "But," he added grimly, "they've slipped a few times of late. Owlhoots always do, sooner or later, specially in little things—little things that add up big before the last brand is run."

Sheriff Baylor turned in his saddle to stare into Hatfield's face, dimly outlined in the star glow.

"Jim," he asked in low tones, "just who the blazes are yuh, anyhow? I've a mighty strong notion yuh ain't just a chuck-ridin' cowpoke."

"We'll have a talk together when we get to yore office," Hatfield replied. "I think it's gettin' pretty close to showdown. . . ."

SOME hours later, Hatfield and Baylor sat alone in the sheriff's office. The lawman glanced expectantly at his companion. Hatfield was fumbling with a cunningly concealed secret pocket in his broad leather belt. He laid something on the table between them.

Sheriff Baylor looked at the object, which glittered in the lamplight. It was a gleaming silver star set on a silver circle, the feared and honored badge of the Texas Rangers!

The sheriff stared at the star with bulging eyes.

"A—a Ranger!" he stuttered at length. "Yuh're a Ranger!"

"That's right," Hatfield admitted. "Captain Bill got yore letter and sent me over to have a look."

Sheriff Baylor continued to stare at the badge. Suddenly he leaped to his feet.

"And I've got yuh placed!" he exclaimed, his eyes glowing. "Yuh're the Lone Wolf!"

"Been called that," Hatfield drawled.

Sheriff Baylor gazed in awe at the almost legendary figure whose exploits were the talk of the whole Southwest.

"The Lone Wolf!" he repeated. "The Lone Wolf—settin' right here in my office! Well, I should have known it. Yuh look and act like a Ranger. I was wonderin' why I didn't hear somethin' from McDowell. I might have known he wouldn't let me down. Have yuh figgered out who's responsible for the ruckus-raisin' hereabouts?"

"Yes, I think I have," Hatfield said quietly, "but so far I haven't a bit of proof that would stand up in court. I'm right shore I know who is the man at the head of the outfit, but so far I have little to go on other than my own conclusions."

"Why not grab him and lock him up?" suggested the impulsive Baylor, who favored direct methods. "Let's do it before he has a chance to pull somethin' else."

Hatfield slowly shook his head.

"Yuh'd never be able to hold him," he assured. "Yuh'd just make a laughing stock of yoreself. And once he realized we suspect him, he'd trail his twine and slip away to where we could never lay hands on him. He's a smart man, Sheriff, and one who's been around plenty. Unless I figger altogether wrong, he's playing for high stakes, and he'll stop at nothin'.

"We've got to have him plumb hogtied before we move, and when we do, we've got to move sudden and fast. He's not the ordinary brand of Border owlhoot. He's just as ornery and salty as any of them, but he's got what most of 'em lack—brains. And he knows how to use 'em. We've got to outsmart him, and that'll be considerable of a chore."

"I figger he's got about as much chance as a wax dog chasin' a asbestos cat through perdition, with the Lone Wolf on his trail," Sheriff Baylor declared with conviction.

Hatfield smiled, his even teeth flashing startlingly white in his bronzed face.

"Nice of yuh to say so," he replied, "but that hellion is a long ways from bein' in the loop, and I've a notion he'll do some hornin' and tossin' before the twine tightens on him. . . ."

The town buzzed with excitement over the recovery of the stolen ingots and the slaying of the four owlhoots. Sheriff Baylor was showered with congratulations. One of the first to congratulate him was Bank President Sime Price.

"A fine chore, Woll," declared Price, "a mighty fine chore. We're plumb proud of yuh."

"But it don't pay much," Baylor sarcastically reminded his friend. "Now if it had been four snorted-up swampers loafin' in front of a bank, I'd have collected twenty thousand pesos!"

Old Sime tugged at his collar, hemmed and hawed, met the amused gleam in Jim Hatfield's eyes, and made no direct reply.

Nobody was able to identify the slain owlhoots. The opinion was strengthened that the outfit was one operating from south of the Rio Grande.

For several days, Hatfield was busy with routine chores on the Bar A spread. Then one afternoon Mary Allison asked him to ride to town with her. Just as they were preparing to leave, Carter Renshaw, who was a not infrequent visitor at the Bar A, rode up and stopped for a cup of coffee and a cigarette.

"Yuh did a mighty good job in connection with that stage holdup," he said to Hatfield admiringly. "Sheriff Baylor gives yuh the credit for runnin' down the swabs. Yuh shore laid 'em by the head. A few more like that and mebbe we'll have peace and fair weather around here again."

HATFIELD nodded his appreciation, a peculiar light in his green eyes.

"May see yuh both in town tonight," Renshaw observed as he prepared to depart. "I

aim to ride that way after I go over my north range."

"I'm going to spend the night in town," Mary said. "I have some shopping to do tomorrow morning. I suppose Jim will ride back to the spread tonight."

"That's right," Hatfield agreed. "Want to get at the west range early tomorrow. I figger there are plenty of fat beefs holed up in the canyons over there. We can use 'em."

Nobody but the sheriff knew of the experience Hatfield and Mary Allison had undergone on the Pasajero Trail. Baylor gave out that Hatfield had noticed tracks leading to the mountain the day before and had merely followed a hunch in suggesting that the robbers might have made them and were using Coffin Mountain as a hole-up.

"I don't want to scare 'em away from that mountain—yet," Hatfield had told him.

"Yuh think they'd have the nerve to use that cave for a hole-up again, after what happened?" Baylor asked incredulously.

Hatfield smiled slightly and shook his head.

"No," he said, "I don't. But I do figger they'll use that mountain again, at least once. I'm shore hopin' so, anyhow. If they do, it'll give us our chance to drop our loop. I figger, too, that losin' the loot from the stage holdup put a crimp in their plans, and that they'll strike somewhere else soon. Most every spread in the section is roundin' up cows for shippin' about now, and somebody is shore to get careless. The hellions know everything that's goin' on, and take advantage of any slips. They'll bust loose somewhere's soon—yuh can be shore of that."

After visiting with the sheriff and old Crane Allison, Hatfield dropped in at the Rambler for a bite to eat. Preston Grimes was present, and nodded to him. Carter Renshaw had not yet put in an appearance. Nor did he show up before Hatfield left for the spread.

Twilight was deepening when the Ranger left town. Coffin Mountain loomed against a sky of gold and scarlet, its mighty shoulders swathed in violet shadows that deepened to purple along the lower reaches of the long slopes. The canyons were already black mouths of mystery. The rangeland was a sea of amethyst bronzed by the fading leaves.

There was an autumn hush in the air, and a sharpness to the wind that stirred the grass heads and rustled the chaparral. As the darkness deepened, a new moon, like a crescent of silver laid against a spangled robe of jet, hung over the crest of Coffin Mountain. High on a blasted pine, an owl wailed dismally. But otherwise the night was very still.

CHAPTER XVI

Brand of the Snake

DARTING swift glances at each thicket and grove as he passed, Hatfield rode warily. He was taking no chances with the outfit that was pitted against him. They would strike, and strike hard, if opportunity afforded.

But nothing happened during the course of his ride. He reached the ranchhouse without incident, stabled his horse and entered the big living room. Lighting a lamp, he settled himself comfortably in an easy chair to enjoy a last leisurely smoke before going to bed.

Deftly he manipulated paper and tobacco. He was just raising the little white cylinder to his lips when abrutly he became conscious of an acrid, pungent smell that a chance draught, perhaps, had wafted to his nostrils.

The odor was unpleasant, being slightly reminiscent of scorched cheese, but holding an elusive familiarity that stirred the chords of his memory and seemed to recall a disagreeable happening.

For some moments he sat at a loss to identify the raw aroma. Then abruptly he sat bolt upright in his chair.

"Marihuana!" he muttered. "That's what it is! Somebody has been smoking marihuana in here, shore as blazes! Who could it have been? I'm plumb shore none of the boys use the darn stuff."

He wondered—could he be mistaken? He was so puzzled that he got lithely to his feet and slipped into the kitchen to see if the cook had perchance left something on the stove that had burned. But the big kitchen was as spotless as usual. Nor did he notice the odor after leaving the front of the house.

Still puzzled, he retraced his steps to the living room. The odor was as strong there as before. He wandered around the room, trying to run it down.

Abruptly he paused. He was beside the closed door that led to the spare bedroom he occupied. Here the acrid smell was stronger

than any place else in the room.

Hatfield stood without sound or motion, listening intently. That someone had been smoking the narcotic within the building he was now positive. And he was just as certain that the odor had seeped from behind the closed door of his sleeping room.

In men who ride much with deadly danger as a constant stirrup companion there is developed a subtle sense that often warns of peril when none, apparently, is present. Jim Hatfield had that sense strongly developed. And now the voiceless monitor in his brain was clamoring for attention.

Hatfield knew something of the effects of marihuana. For instance, how it tended to bring murderous propensities to the fore. He had known men to use the drug to build up a false courage, to fortify themselves in face of danger or to dull normal inhibitions. He knew that upon Mexicans and Indians in particular the effect was lethal where their impulses toward others were concerned.

"If some hellion is out to pull a killin', it would be just like him to take a whiff or two to nerve him up," he considered. "I wonder, now—is some sidewinder holed up in that room waitin' for me to come in?"

He knew the owlhoot outfit which was operating in the vicinity would stop at nothing. That had already been proved. He realized also that by now the owlhoots must consider him a menace that must be removed. Whether or not they had divined his Ranger connections was doubtful, but his actions had shown conclusively that he was arrayed on the side of law and order or was playing some subtle game of his own.

Neither was to their advantage. It was logical to believe that they would endeavor by every means possible to get him out of the way. One attempt at drygulching had failed. Doubtless the outfit was much puzzled as to what had become of the two members who staged the attempt.

But the mystery would cause them to redouble their efforts, rather than deter them. To plant a ruthless killer in Hatfield's room to shoot him down as he entered would be a simple and easy way to eliminate him.

All this sped through his mind as he stood tense and silent outside the closed door, evolving a plan of action.

Careful not to make the slightest noise, he crept past the door and crouched against the wall. He loosened his guns in their sheaths, reached out and gently grasped the knob. The door opened outward. A swift turned of the knob, a hard jerk and he could fling it wide open. The unexpectedness of the happening would tend to throw off balance anybody hiding in the room and waiting for him to enter.

With one swift, supple movement, he put the thought into action. The door slammed open, banging against the wall.

There was a thundering crash, a gush of flame. Buckshot screeched through the opening. The window on the far side of the living room went to pieces with a prodigious smashing and clattering of broken glass. Smoke boiled from the bedroom.

HATFIELD went back along the wall a half dozen steps, guns out, his thumbs hooked over the cocked hammers. Every nerve strung to the tightness of stretched wire, he waited, his eyes trained on the door.

Nothing happened. The inner room was utter silence. He could hear the muffled shouts of the aroused cowboys in the bunkhouse. He waited for the thud of feet outside the bedroom that would tell that the gun wielder was seeking to escape by way of the window, but no sound came to him.

His glance flickered past the open door and abruptly centered on a length of string dangling from the doorknob. Instantly he understood. Straightening up, he approached the open door, stepped boldly into the bedroom, and halted. He was staring into the twin muzzles of a sawed-off shotgun.

For tense moments, Hatfield stood gazing at the blackened muzzles of the sawed-off. The wicked weapon was lashed to one of the posts of his bed and trained on the door. A broken string, tied securely to the triggers and looped around the hammers, showed how the gun had been fired.

"String tied to the doorknob," he muttered. "If I'd opened the door to step into the room, as the hellion figgered I'd do, I'd have got both barrels dead center. If the sidewinder hadn't stopped to take a drag on a reefer before he started to work, that's just what would have happened. The owlhoot brand always slip up on the little things. Everything was lined up perfect, but he had to go and smell up the house with marihuana. Some outfit, all right. Well, this makes two tries. I'd better make it my business that there isn't a third time. The luck can't hold out forever."

The open window showed how the killer

had gained entrance to the bedroom. He had doubtless left the same way, after rigging up his infernal machine.

Boots pounded on the veranda. The outer door banged open and the Bar A cowboys boiled into the room, guns out and ready, old Stiffy leading the way. They took in the situation at a glance and swore explosive oaths as they examined the devilish contraption lashed to the bedpost.

"We heard it let go!" Stiffy cried. "Didn't know what had busted loose, but figgered we'd better get here pronto. Reckon the hellion must have been keepin' tabs on the house, saw you and Mary ride away and figgered it for his chance, when there was nobody here. Easy for him to slip in after it got dark and us fellers went to bed. Of all the pizenous, fangin' sons of Tophet! Son, yuh shore had a close call. How come it didn't get yuh? Them muzzles are trained to down anybody who opened the door."

Hatfield explained just what happened. The punchers swore some more.

"Yuh got a keen nose, all right," said Stiffy, sniffing sharply. "I don't smell a thing."

"It's considerable drafty in here right now," Hatfield replied, glancing at the smashed window. "The place got aired out in a hurry right after I opened the door."

"Nothin' would please me better'n to let air through the hyderphobia skunk that rigged up that contraption," growled Stiffy. "Don't know what we're all comin' to. It ain't safe to be alive around here any more. They're shore out to get yuh, son. Reckon they aim to even up for losin' them silver bars. If I was you, and had a outfit like that gunnin' for me, I'd trail my twine out of the Nueces country pronto!"

"Good advice," Hatfield agreed, "but I'm not takin' it."

"Didn't figger yuh would," grunted Stiffy, "but yuh're a plumb fool not to."

After examining the ground under the bedroom window, and failing to find any footprints, the cowboys went back to bed. Hatfield sat in the living room for some time before retiring, thoughtfully smoking. Once he got up and walked to the smashed window. For some moments he stood gazing southwestward toward the unseen waters of the bay. His glance shifted to the dark bulk of Coffin Mountain shouldering the star-strewn sky, and back again to the southwest.

"Figger it won't be long, now," he mused. "The sidewinders are gettin' desperate. They're purty bad scared, and slippin' up again tonight won't make 'em feel any better. Anyhow, we've thinned 'em out considerable. The four the other night make nine altogether, not countin' the one I figger I winged the night I rode in here. I've a notion there wasn't more'n a dozen or so workin' this end of the game in the beginnin'. Figger the next move they make will bring out the leaders of the pack, short-handed as they must be. If things work out right, we'll drop a loop on the whole crawling nest of them. Shore hope I get a letter from Captain

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RANGER HATFIELD FIGHTS TO SMASH AN

WHEN the Lone Wolf Lawman rides to Gillespie County to side the defrauded owners of contested rangeland, he pits himself against vicious land sharks and scheming killers who have worked out a foolproof system of land-grabbing! Their sinister activities deprive many honest, hard-working ranchers of their homes—and it's up to Jim Hatfield to expose their crooked manipulations and bring them to book. During the course of his investigation, Jim matches guns and fists with many a foe—in a breath-taking full-length novel which bristles with dynamic action. SIXGUN SYNDICATE is a veritable epic of the West—and brings you Hatfield at top fighting form! Look forward to a grand fiction treat, packed with thrills and surprises!

Bill tomorrow—and a report on the specimens I sent to the State University would help, too."

HIS thoughts shifted to Mary Allison, whom he had left in town.

"Better ride up there first thing in the mornin'," he decided. "Don't want to take any chances with her. No tellin' what the hellions are liable to pull."

Pinching out the butt of his cigarette, he extinguished the light and went to bed, the dumb muzzles of the sawed-off glaring through the dark over his head. . . .

When he arrived at the Lorenzo post office the following morning, he found the hoped-for letter from Captain McDowell awaiting him. He read the contents with keen satisfaction, an exultant glow in his green eyes.

"Tyin' up," he muttered. "Everything tyin' up perfect. Just a loose end or two bangin' around yet, and I'll hitch a knot in them mighty soon."

There was no report from the university laboratory as yet, but he had hardly expected it so soon, and was not particularly disappointed at its non-arrival.

Mary Allison was much concerned when she heard what had taken place at the ranchhouse the night before. Hatfield told her about it as they rode through the golden autumn sunshine on the way back to the spread. For some time she sat her horse in silence, after he had finished. Suddenly she turned in her saddle and let the steady gaze of her wide blue eyes rest on his face.

"Jim," she said slowly, "as much as I hate to lose you, I think you had better give up your job and leave."

Hatfield smiled down at her from his great height, his green eyes sunny as a summer sea.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because," she replied, "I'm afraid for you. Those outlaws hate you for what you have done to them. They'll try again, and next time they may not fail. Yes, I think you had better go."

"Firin' me?" Hatfield asked, still smiling.

"You know very well I'm not," the girl replied. "I want you to leave for your own sake, not mine."

"Figger I'd leave yuh to fight it out alone?" he asked soberly.

"No," she said, "and that's just what I'm afraid of. That you won't. But if you stay and something happens to you, I—I'll never forgive myself."

"Don't let it worry yuh, little lady," the Ranger said, his face abruptly grave. "It's other folks things are goin' to happen to—soon."

Glancing at his face again, she saw that his eyes had subtly changed color. No longer were they the smiling blue-green of the sea warm in the sun. They were the ominous gray of that same sea under a wintry sky of storm-driven clouds and icy wind. He was staring into the southwest, his face bleak,

[*Turn page*]

EVIL CONSPIRACY OF PLUNDER AND DEATH!

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his mouth sternly set, and Mary Allison felt that for the moment he had completely forgotten her presence.

As to that, she was right. For the face she was looking into was the face of the Lone Wolf—on the trail!

CHAPTER XVII

Mouth of the Pit

PAUSING at the ranchhouse only long enough to eat, Hatfield rode to the west range, where he found old Stiffy and the other hands busy combing out beefs from the brakes and canyons.

"Figger we can get a prime herd out of them holes," the grizzled puncher told his foreman. "They're plumb fat and sassy and r'arin' to go."

Two days passed, with the men all hard at work, before Jim Hatfield again rode to town. He found the expected laboratory report awaiting him then, and was greatly pleased with the contents.

"I was right," he thought. "Just what I expected. Better even than I expected. Well, looks like the little lady won't have to worry about that mortgage on her spread. No wonder them hellions were makin' such a play for it. And this ties up with everything else I suspected. All I need now is to drop my loop on the sidewinder, and I figger he'll make another move soon. That'll be my chance. But I can't afford to make any slips, not with that outfit. One slip and he'll slide away like a snake into a hole."

The Ranger left the post office and went to look for Sheriff Baylor, whom he found seated at his desk. He handed Baylor the folded sheet of paper in its envelope.

"Put this in yore office safe," he told him. "It's a chemical analysis of the land that makes up the Bar A's south range—that barren stretch along the bay. Hold onto this report until I ask for it. If for any reason I shouldn't ask for it, it goes to Mary Allison. The report speaks for itself and won't be hard to understand."

The sheriff took the paper wonderingly. He started to ask a question, but a glance at the Lone Wolf's face deterred him. With a nod, he opened his safe, stowed the paper in an inner compartment, and locked the safe.

"It'll be there for yuh when yuh want it," he said. "And now—have yuh figgered out anything else in connection with that nest of sidewinders?"

"I've got somethin' lined up," Hatfield admitted, "but it all depends on their makin' another move, which I figger they'll do before long. I'll be back day after tomorrow and tell yuh what I want done."

He paused for a word with old Crane Allison, who was stretched out on the bunk in his cell, then rode back to the spread. Reaching there, he at once went to work again with the busy punchers.

"We'll start up north on that west range and work down," he told Stiffy. "I figger we should be able to clean the canyons by the end of the week. Then we'll have another herd ready for shippin'."

As he helped the Bar A hands comb the brakes the following day, Hatfield was wondering where the owlhoots would strike next. For he still was fairly certain that they would strike, and before long. But he was totally unprepared for the move they did make.

It was mid-afternoon. Hatfield and his men had combed a number of good beefs from a shallow draw in the western hills. Outside the draw they paused to breathe their horses and enjoy a smoke. Old Stiffy was holding out on the advantages of a "hooley-ann" in calf roping, and a "*mangana*" for use in a pen.

"A good hand can throw a mangana from horseback as well as on foot," another waddy observed.

"When a cow has a good runnin' start, loopin' both forefeet is liable to throw him too hard and bust him all up," Stiffy maintained. "Now with a *mangana de cabra*—"

"Shucks!" objected the other cowhand. "Catch a cow around the neck and by both forefeet at the same time—and that's the only right way to use a *mangana de cabra*—and yuh're mighty nigh shore to bust a neck or a leg, if he happens to have got up speed. Give me a good straight underhand toss for mine any time. Loop the critter over the head and yuh got him, and less damage liable to be done."

"And if yore hoss ain't plumb set, you are the one what's liable to get busted, not the cow," declared Stiffy. "'Specially if yuh happen to be tied hard and fast."

"A good cowhand always ties hard and fast," observed another ranny, starting an argument that is as old as the cow business.

"That's coverin' too much territory," Stiffy disagreed. "Up north they always take their dallies. Three, four loops around the horn, and turn to go if yuh want to—and there's just as good cow chasers up there as there ever was in Texas. Now I recollect when I was ridin' for the Hashknife outfit in Montana—" He paused suddenly in his harangue and stared northward. "Say!" he exclaimed. "Some jigger has shore lit a big fire up there. What's he aimin' to do—barbecue a beef?"

THE others followed the direction of his gaze. Smoke was boiling up from the brush a couple of miles or so to the north. It was a thick, dark column that broke under the force of the wind blowing steadily out of the north and spread out in a rolling cloud.

"That's too darn much smoke for a cookin' fire!" somebody exclaimed. "Say, I wonder—"

Jim Hatfield's voice rang out, hard, incisive:

"That's no cookin' fire! That's a brush fire, and a big one! On yore toes, every one of yuh. The wind's rollin' it along in this direction. It'll sweep these thorn pastures clear to the bay, and all the canyons on the way down! We got to get these cows out of the canyons before it gets here—and out of these pastures. Drive 'em south to the *sacaguista* flats by the water. Move, or we won't have enough beefs left on this spread to make steaks for a hummin' bird!"

The cowboys were instantly alive to the danger that threatened. They tightened their cinches, gathered up the reins in firm grips and made ready for hard riding.

"Three of yuh drive these cows we've rounded up, and beat through the pastures," Hatfield directed. "Get everything yuh come across movin' south. I figger it won't be much of a chore over there, with the smoke rollin' this way ahead of the fire. But in the canyons and draws the darn fool critters will bore in deeper as the fire comes, and then they'll be goners. Come on, yuh work dodgers, the rest of yuh! That canyon half a mile to the south first! Hightail!"

At top speed they raced for the canyon mouth, tearing through the thick brush, heedless of thorns and whipping branches. They pulled their horses to skating halts at the dark opening of the gorge.

"One man stay here," Hatfield directed. "Keep yore gun handy and fire a couple shots to warn us to get out when yuh figger the fire's gettin' too close. All right, the rest of yuh—in we go!"

Up the canyon they thundered, urging their horses to greater effort.

"I figger it ain't over deep!" Hatfield shouted above the din of the pounding hoofs. "We'll ride to the head, then comb her to the mouth."

At the frowning end wall of the gorge they turned their horses and began beating the brush on the way back. As Hatfield had surmised, there were a number of cows holed up in the canyon. They sent them down the gorge at breakneck speed.

There was none of the careful handling customary to avoid running valuable fat off the beefs. With lashing quirts, wild yells, and blazing six-shooters, they drove the bawling, terrified beasts before them.

They were little more than two-thirds of the way to the mouth when two warning shots sounded.

"Touch and go!" Hatfield muttered. "If we get caught in one of these holes we're goners all right!"

"Smoke's gettin' thick in here!" bellowed old Stiffy. "She's roarin' ahead of that wind!"

Brands were showering down in the brush and the smoke was swirling in acrid clouds when they bulged from the canyon mouth. The fire was racing down from the north in a great sheet that seemed to stretch clear across the valley. The wind had strengthened, and as far as they could see under the smoke clouds to the north was a seething inferno.

Once in the open, the cattle needed little urging to speed them southward. With that roaring terror at their heels they proceeded to "get up and get." Hatfield and his men rode in their wake until another canyon mouth was reached. They had gained considerably on the fire, so the Ranger took a chance and entered the canyon.

Fortunately the gorge proved shallower than the first, but just the same the hand stationed at the mouth had pulled trigger twice before they cleared it with another batch of frantic cows.

The sun had almost set when they entered the third draw. A baleful reddish light slanted through the smoke clouds, and the racing flames glowed brighter in the gloom.

"This one will be close," Hatfield prophesied, "but we've got to take it!"

The horses were beginning to show the

effect of the wild afternoon. They were blowing and panting, their blood-congested eyes rolled, their nostrils flared. They were smeared with ash, scorched by falling brands, seared with sparks.

The riders were the same. But grimly they sped to the head of the draw, turned and tore back again through the thorny brush, spread out wide like an army in open order.

WHEN they heard the distant shots that warned them to "get out and get out fast," this time, they were far up-canyon. They bulged from the gorge through a cloud of smoke and showering brands. Little flames raced through the grass, causing the horses to squeal with pain.

Coughing, gasping, reeling in their saddles the cowboys managed to get the cows turned and headed south with the wall of flame at the very heels of their horses. The heat was terrific, the air almost unbreathable because of the smoke. Falling brands were starting fresh flickers in the tinder-dry brush.

And the *sacaguista* flats were still nearly three miles distant!

"There's one more that needs workin'!" Hatfield called. "Two men shove the cows along. The rest of yuh ride, and ride like yuh never did before. Let's go!"

Forcing their almost jaded horses to give their utmost, they raced southward. Hatfield congratulated himself that, in violation of his customary habit of not risking the sorrel's legs in ordinary range work, he was forking Goldy instead of one of the string that had been assigned to him when he had taken a job on the Bar A spread. Now he was forced to hold the great horse in in deference to the lesser ability of his companions' mounts.

Overhead the lurid smoke pall reddened in the glare of the sunset. Streaks of fire that were burning brands whirled high on the wings of the rearing wind, shot across its rolling surface. It was spangled with sparks. Bloody streamers coiled and writhed, throwing off opalescent glints and coruscations. Sheets of what looked like living flame billowed forth. The north was an incandescent furnace. The salt flats were incarnadined. The bay was a sea of wine flecked with a sanguinous froth.

"If Gehenna looks any wuss than back behind us, I don't want to go there," grunted old Stiffy, glancing over his shoulder.

Hatfield's teeth flashed white in his blackened face.

"If there's any slip-up in this canyon we're comin' to, yuh got a good chance to find out," he said.

"Wish I'd led a better life," Stiffy sighed. "Son, I'm plain scared."

"Reckon a jigger who wouldn't be scared of this mess would have to have somethin' plumb wrong with him," Hatfield comforted. "All right! Here we go! You stay outside this time, Chuck. Yore cayuse is just about on his last legs."

The gloom was intense in the canyon. The horses stumbled and lurched over the boulders, squealed wrathfully as the thorns tore at their hides. Cows could be heard popping the bushes. Others were lowing in a frightened manner.

"They know somethin' is plumb wrong, but haven't got sense enough to get in the clear by theirselves," Hatfield panted. "There's the end wall ahead—yuh can barely see it. Fan out and beat the brush!"

"Get along little dogies, if yuh don't hanker to be roast beef before yore time!" whooped Stiffy. "Yip-ay-ay!"

CHAPTER XVIII

Sort of an Exciting Day

EXPERIENCES they had gone through before were repeated—a mad race with death under the blazing sky and through the inferno of smoke and heat. Lashing the terror-stricken cows with quirts and rope ends, the cowboys sent their staggering horses down the canyon.

"There's fire ahead of us!" one of the punchers screamed. "And there's Chuck's shots!"

He was right. Directly ahead was a thin straggle of flame, started doubtless by a falling brand. It grew and heightened with terrifying speed. Above its crackle and roar they could hear the reports of Chuck's six-shooter as he fired again and again. The cowboy was alive to his companions' danger and was frantically trying to warn them.

The cattle slowed as the sheet of flame leaped before them. They tried to hang back, to shy away, but were driven on by stinging blows and banging guns in their ears. With mad bellows they charged through the fire.

The cowboys, shielding their faces with their arms, rode after them.

Hatfield felt the searing breath of the fire that leaped about him. His lungs felt bursting. An iron band seemed tightening and tightening about his chest. His eyes were dazzled by the fierce light. He dared not breathe.

He saw old Stiffy, who was riding next to him, reel in his hull, slump forward onto his horse's neck. Hatfield shot out a long arm and gripped the grizzled waddy as he was sliding to the ground.

The terrific strain of the sagging weight almost hurled Hatfield from the saddle. He recovered his balance by a miracle of strength and agility, hauled the unconscious old cowboy from his hull and draped his body across Goldy's withers. Stiffy's horse, freed of its rider's weight, shot ahead with a snort of relief.

"Trail, Goldy, trail!" Hatfield's voice rang out.

The great sorrel, who had fallen behind the others, extended himself. His powerful legs shot backward like steel pistons. His irons beat the hard earth with a drumroll of sound. Snorting and blowing, he surged through the curtain of flame and thundered toward the canyon mouth, now only a few hundred yards distant. With a final explosive snort of relief he shot forth into the clearer air.

His appearance was welcomed by whoops of relief from the other hands who, heedless of the fire roaring toward them from the north, were staring in horror up the smoke-filled gorge.

"Feller, we figgered yuh was both done in when Stiffy's hoss came out with an empty saddle!" exclaimed Chuck.

"Not this time," Hatfield called cheerily. "Stiffy'll come out of it in a minute. Heat and smoke got him. Roll 'em along. We just about got time to make the flats before our cayuses are plumb tuckered. Hightail! The wind is gettin' stronger."

The fire was roaring and crackling in the last thickets when they raced out upon the salt flats and into purer air. The horses stood with legs wide-spread, heads hanging, sides heaving, in the last stages of exhaustion. The cowboys tumbled out of their hulls and lay prone on the coarse grass. Hatfield alone remained in his saddle, staring northward at the fearful spectacle.

The scene was one of awesome beauty. East and west, the thorn pastures were a sea of flame, tossing, billowing, rolling and wavering in the wind. The cliffs to the west stood out in glaring relief, crimson with reflected light, ebon with shadows. Streamers of fire ran along the grass heads, leaping upward to the crest of a bush, diving into the hollows like shimmering serpents, writhing up the slopes, coiling, wavering, shot with opalescence, robed in scarlet, streaked with violet and purple and molten gold. Overhead the billowing smoke clouds were a reflection of the inferno below—a tossing, blinding tempest of fire.

Coffin Mountain was a blazing torch. Sheets of flame flowed up the slopes, climbing the tree trunks, bursting into skyrocket showers of sparks at their crowns. They went surging up adjacent ridges, vanished into canyons beyond, burst into view again, grander, brighter, more breath-taking. Skirmishing parties of fire were thrown out and went trailing their crimson spirals up farther ridges, turned black gorges into pits of brilliant light, climbed higher and higher, spread more and more, until the whole mountainside was webbed as if with a tangled network of lava streams.

For more than an hour Hatfield sat entranced. But finally the fire burned itself out, save for glows and smolders. The wind cleared the smoke from the sky somewhat, the stars came out, reddish and glowering. The moon came up from behind the hills and hung above their crests like a deeply yellow orange poised on the edge of an inverted blue bowl. The bay turned darkly blue, then black, flecked with ghostly white, streaked with phosphorescent gleams.

HATFIELD shifted his gaze to the cattle dotted over the flats.

"We saved quite a few," he told his companions, as he dismounted and rolled a cigarette.

"We lost plenty too, though," mourned Stiffy, who had recovered his senses and was little the worse for wear. "I'm scared this will be about the finish of the Bar A."

"The Bar A hasn't got anything to worry about," Hatfield said casually. "I'm sorry for the pore critters that got caught, but aside from that it don't mean a thing. The pastures will be all the better next year for this burnin' over, and there will be plenty of better cows grazin' on 'em. Yuh don't have to worry about a job, Stiffy."

"Well, Jim, if you say so, I'll borrow money

to bet on it," the old cowboy said simply. "I can't for the life of me understand how yuh figger it, but if you say it's so, I reckon it is so."

Hatfield examined the cattle they had rescued. They were good "beef critters" in prime condition, and made up a fine herd. They had got over their fright and were contentedly grazing, evidently considering the sparse grass of the flats better than nothing.

As they grazed, Hatfield noted, they trended eastward, where the pasturage was better, and kept well-bunched.

"They won't leave the flats to stray onto that burned-over section," he mused. "They'll stay right here for a spell."

For some time he sat his horse, gazing into the southwest and thinking deeply. His face wore a pleased expression when he finally returned to his companions.

"Looks like she is about burned out," observed Stiffy. "Only a few flickers left here and there. I'll bet yuh it's still purty hot up there yet, though. Chances are yuh could fry an egg on any rock in the trail."

"It'll cool down before long," Hatfield told him. "A brush fire is always hot as blue blazes for a time, but it don't hold up like it does where there is big timber. Them trees up on the mountain will smolder along for quite a while yet."

"A good rain will wash everything clean again," Stiffy said. "And them ashes will make fine fertilizer. I reckon if it wasn't for you, Jim, I'd be makin' purty good fertilizer myself about now."

"Yuh'd pizen the grass roots," a companion declared. "And all the ant critters and things would get drunk on the red-eye that stewed out of yuh. Well, I shore hope she cools down soon. I could stand a mite of chuck about now. My stomach is wonderin' if I got my throat sewed up."

It was long past midnight, however, before they felt safe to ride north again.

They found the ranchhouse and other buildings which were set on a hill and away from the chaparral, untouched by the fire. But Mary Allison, the cook and the wranglers were badly worried about their non-appearance.

"I don't care what else happened, just so you all got back safe!" the girl declared in tones of heartfelt relief. "We didn't know what might have happened. It was terrible! How in the world do you imagine such a fire got started?"

"Ain't hard to figger, I reckon," Hatfield said grimly. "It shore didn't catch by itself."

"You mean some one deliberately set it?" Mary asked, horrified.

"It didn't catch by itself," Hatfield repeated.

"But why would anyone do such a thing?" she demanded in bewilderment. "Who would profit by it?"

"I've a right good idea yuh'll find out all about that in time," was all Hatfield would say. "Well, I figger after we eat, we'd all be better off for a mite of shut-eye. It's been a sort of exciting day. . . ."

The following afternoon, Hatfield prepared to ride to Lorenzo.

"How about them cows down on the flats?" Stiffy asked. "Reckon we'd better set a guard over 'em, hadn't we? There's some purty valuable critters down there."

Hatfield shook his head.

"No, I don't want a guard set," he replied. "Leave 'em just as they are, and don't worry about 'em."

The old ranny looked bewildered.

"It don't make sense to me," he declared dubiously. "But it's all right, if you say so."

UPON arriving at Lorenzo, Hatfield immediately sought out Sheriff Baylor.

"I figger we're set for the showdown," he told the old peace officer. "I believe that herd down on the flats will be a temptation the hellions won't be able to resist. I'm plumb shore they're keepin' tabs on everything we do, and when they see that herd is left unguarded, it's just about certain they'll make a play for it. If they do, I figger we'll have a mighty good chance to drop a loop on the whole outfit."

"Yuh mean we'll hole up out of sight and wait for 'em to come to run off the herd?" asked Baylor.

"Not exactly," Hatfield said. "I want 'em to grab off that herd without any trouble. Now here is what I want you to do, Sheriff. This thing has got to be handled mighty careful so's they won't catch on a trap is bein' laid for 'em. More'n likely they are mighty suspicious about now. They'll make shore everything is safe before they make a try for the beefs. It won't be hard for 'em to get a line on that, but they haven't the least idea we'll do what we're goin' to do. Listen careful, now, and no slips. It may seem sort of loco to yuh, but I know what I'm doin'."

The Ranger leaned forward, and for some

time spoke swiftly, in a low tone.

When Hatfield left the sheriff's office, he stopped at the Rambler first and had a drink and a bite to eat. Preston Grimes was not in evidence at the moment. Nor did he see anything of Carter Renshaw or his foreman.

CHAPTER XIX

Outlaws Strike

NIGHT was falling when Hatfield rode out of Lorenzo. It was dark, for the moon would not rise for some hours. Hatfield made good speed along the shadowy trail, confident that his movements could not be observed.

He rode several miles, until he reached the east end of the long hogback north of Coffin Mountain. Here he abruptly turned from the trail and took up a position at the edge of a thicket, where the shadows were deep. Dismounting, and allowing Goldy to graze, he smoked comfortably and waited.

An hour passed. Then he heard the hoofbeats of an approaching horseman. They came nearer and then Sheriff Baylor pulled off the trail and approached the thicket.

"All right," Hatfield told him. "The other boys all set?"

"They slid out of town in different directions, after dark," the sheriff informed. "There's my two deputies, the two fellers who rode with us the day of the stage robbery, and three other gents who can be counted on to stand up to anything that comes along. Yuh figger that'll be enough?"

"Nine of us," Hatfield counted. "Shore, that'll be plenty. I doubt if there'll be more than that against us, and we'll have all the advantage of surprise on our side. I figger there'll be a shindig, though. At least three of the hellions ain't the sort to give up easy. We can't take any chances, Baylor, or we'll lose men. It's a salty outfit."

"They done proved that," grunted the sheriff. "Listen! Ain't that somebody comin' down the trail? Two of 'em. That ought to be the deputies, Pete and Cary. They were to get together up the trail a piece."

Less than an hour later, the full posse rode swiftly southward along the Pasajero. They were grim-faced and quiet, and sternly resolved.

To the very edge of the bay, Hatfield led them. Then he turned sharply westward to follow the coast line. As he rode he continually glanced northward toward where Coffin Mountain loomed grim and massive against the stars. They had almost reached the deep, land-locked cove he had discovered during his previous ride across the desert when he saw what he had expected and hoped to see.

On the dark crest of the mountain flickered a tiny light that swiftly grew in size. It flared and wavered, billowed high into the air, burned fiercely for a few moments, then quickly sank and died.

"There's the signal," Hatfield said quietly. "Everything is all set. They're grabbin' off the herd and shovin' it along. Hightail, now! We haven't got much time to get in the clear."

The desert was deathly silent, shimmering faintly in the dim starshine. Butte and chimney rock stood out black and ominous. The hoofs of the horses made practically no sound in the soft sand as they flitted, wraithlike, through the gloom. Only the popping of saddle leather and the jingle of bridle irons betrayed the party as flesh and blood and not ghostly mirages of the wasteland.

Hatfield strained his eyes ahead. He exclaimed with satisfaction when the level shore line began to slope gently upward. He knew they were approaching the deep, land-locked cove he sought. He veered Goldy slightly to the north and they skirted the cove some distance from the water's edge.

The slope of the land to the west was more abrupt than to the east. The crest of the sag was an outcropping of spired and broken rock which afforded the posse ample concealment. The horses were tethered in a straggle of thicket some distance down the slope, where a chance snort or stamping would not be heard.

Tense and alert, the possemen took up positions of vantage and waited. The curve of the cove lay not more than a score of yards below where they crouched.

For a long time nothing happened. Then from out on the black waters of the bay came a sound, faint at first, but steadily growing louder, a creaking and slatting, and the rustle and surge of something through the water.

"A straight hunch," Hatfield breathed to the sheriff. "Here she comes!"

In the mouth of the cove suddenly loomed something dim and enormous. Another mo-

ment and the watchers saw that it was a vessel of considerable size, slowly entering the cove. Her square-rigged sails blotted out the stars, her hull was a huge blacker shadow against the black water.

Slowly she plowed forward with slatting canvas and creaking cordage. A sharp word of command sounded from her shadowy deck. The spreading sails were furled by unseen hands. The ship quickly lost weigh. There was a rattle of anchor chain through the hawsepipe, the splash of the hook in the water. The vessel swung on her cable and came to a stop, her bowsprit thrusting out parallel to the low bank.

NOW that the ship was safely in the landlocked cove, her crew made no pretense of concealment. Lanterns were lighted and strung low in the rigging, making the deck as bright as day. She was revealed as a good-sized coastwise vessel, broad of beam, bluff-bowed. Two-thirds of her spacious deck was corralled by means of stout planks nailed to posts let into the deck boards.

The crew—Hatfield counted a half-dozen of them—moved about chattering together, sometimes in English, sometimes in Spanish. They cast expectant glances shoreward, opened the swinging gates of the corral on the deck, removed a portion of the deck rail, and let down wide gangplanks that sloped gently from the deck to the shore. Then they lounged about, smoking, at their ease and apparently with no feeling of insecurity.

"Gosh, what a system!" breathed Sheriff Baylor. "So this is how they do it! Load 'em onto the ship and smuggle 'em into Mexico or some place. Well, this is a new wrinkle in wideloopin'! Listen! Don't I hear somethin'?"

Hatfield had heard it, too—the wail, thin with distance, of a tired and peevish steer.

"Get set!" he whispered. "Here they come. Let 'em all get on board and then rush 'em."

The bawling of the approaching cattle grew louder. A soft rustling sound became apparent, the swishing of many hoofs in the sand. The men aboard ship knocked out their pipes, became alert. They strung along the landward rail, peering and pointing.

Over the eastern hills, the upper circle of the late moon was just appearing. Faint, reddish rays fingered across the sands. Objects became dimly visible. Far to the east shadowy shapes appeared, swiftly growing larger. The protests of the harried cattle sounded loud on the still air.

Soon the herd could be clearly seen, as well as the horsemen who urged them on. Hatfield counted four altogether.

Up to the cove pounded the herd, slowing gradually. Two horsemen rode alongside their flanks and veered the leaders. They jostled and milled for a few moments, then, as the riders slashed them with quirts, turned onto the gangplank and thudded up it. They clattered across the deck, bawling protest, and were shoved through the corral gate.

Soon the deck was packed with the noisy, jostling mass. Trusses of hay were hurled into the enclosure and the cows gradually settled down to feeding.

When the last of the beefs were up the gangplank, the four horsemen dismounted and climbed to the deck, mingling with the shipment. A swarthy, bearded giant of a fellow with gold rings in his ears came forward with a word of greeting.

"Up and at them!" Hatfield told his men.

The possemen rose to their feet and raced noiselessly down the slope. They were halfway up the gangplank before they were observed by the men on the deck. The rustlers whirled about with shouts of alarm. The light of the lanterns fell full on their faces.

One was a squat, broad-faced individual. Both his companions were tall and broad-shouldered. They were Peasley Wallace, the Double R foreman, Preston Grimes, and Carter Renshaw.

Jim Hatfield was in the van of the charging possemen. His face was as bleak as carved granite, his eyes coldly gray. On his broad breast gleamed the star of the Texas Rangers.

"In the name of the State of Texas!" his voice rang out, edged with steel. "You are under arrest!"

Preston Grimes yelled a curse. His right hand flickered to his shoulder holster. Hatfield drew and shot him between the eyes before he could clear leather. The roar of guns filled the air.

And now set in a fell and fierce fight, one of a thousand of which no writer has spoken, no poet sung. Throughout the years, over all those Southern waters and wastelands nameless men have fought in nameless places, their sole monuments a protected coast and a land where law and order and justice prevail.

The crash of shots, the thudding of blows, the screams of wounded men, the bawling of terrified cattle rose in a pandemonium of sound. Knives flashed, guns blazed. The owl-

hoots fought like cornered rats, as hopeless and as vicious.

The giant captain of the smuggling crew, wielding a huge machête, rushed forward and fell with his face almost against the flaming muzzle of Sheriff Baylor's gun. A sailor closed with a posseman and the two crashed to the deck, locked in a death grip.

Hatfield saw Peasley Wallace's barrel line with his breast, but before the foreman could pull trigger, Hatfield's Colt bucked in his hand. Wallace fell backward with a choking cry.

CARTER RENSHAW leaped forward, his gun blazing. Hatfield weaved to one side, pulled trigger and heard the hammer of his six click on an empty shell.

Renshaw's gun was also empty. He slashed a wicked blow at the Ranger's head with the barrel. Hatfield ducked it, and the two crashed together, dropping their empty guns. Back and forth across the blood-slippery deck they struggled, tearing, straining, jolting one another with short, wicked blows.

Renshaw was nearly as tall as the Ranger, and many pounds heavier, and he seemed to be made of steel wires. Twice his greater weight and giant strength had Hatfield nearly down, and twice the Lone Wolf's own greater youth and skill saved him.

On the very edge of the yawning open hatch they strained and wrestled, neither giving an inch. Renshaw had a grip on Hatfield's throat with one hand and the Ranger gasped for breath as the fingers tightened and dug into his flesh. He struck at Renshaw's face with his free hand, but the man ducked his head against his opponent's shoulder and doggedly held on.

Hatfield felt his strength going. He could not resist the throttling of that murderous grip for long. With a mighty effort he leaped backward, Renshaw's nails furrowing his flesh as his fingers slipped. Hatfield staggered drunkenly, scant feet from the open hatch, breathing in great gulps. Renshaw, his face the face of a madman, his eyes glaring murder, insane with fury, rushed at him with clutching hands.

Hatfield ducked under the grip, caught Renshaw by the thighs and hurled him over his shoulder—helped as much by Renshaw's own mad rush as by the trained strength in the heave.

Renshaw hurtled through the air, arms and legs revolving. With an awful cry of agony and despair he shot down the open hatch. The cry was abruptly stilled by the crash of his broken body on the timbers far below.

Gasping and choking, with red flashes storming before his eyes, Hatfield sagged against the mast, fighting the waves of blackness that threatened to engulf him. Dimly he realized that the sounds of conflict had stilled. Over against the rail, several possemen were binding two of the smuggling crew who still remained on their feet. Sheriff Baylor came striding across the deck, mopping at the blood that streamed down his face.

"Two of the boys won't ride back with us," he said somberly. "Pete has a busted arm. McGregor got a hunk of meat scalloped off his ribs. Evans has a knife wound in his back; not bad, I figger. All the sidewinders are dead, except them two water snakes the boys are tiein' up over there. It was some shindig. You all right, son?"

"I'll be all right soon as I get my wind back," Hatfield replied.

"I saw you and Renshaw goin' to it—who'd have believed he'd be mixed up in such a business?—but I couldn't get over to help yuh. You handled him all right by yoreself, though."

"I don't want to tackle another like him," Hatfield said soberly. "For a while it was touch and go as to who would go down the hatch. Well, I guess this about winds up the whole business. Let's look things over."

"They were workin' it comin' and goin'," the sheriff reported a little later. "The cabin is stuffed full of 'dobe dollars, bales of marihuana, and other contraband. Looks like we've busted up a smugglin' ring as well as a wideloopin' outfit."

"Reckon they went in for most everything," Hatfield agreed. "Renshaw wasn't the ordinary owlhoot variety by a long ways. He was a mighty smart hombre. Too bad he couldn't have put his smartness to some good use. Likely he would have gone a long ways."

"How in blazes did yuh ever get a line on Renshaw?" the sheriff wondered. "He's the last jigger in the whole Nueces country I'd have figgered as wearin' the owlhoot brand. I don't figger anybody hereabouts ever suspected him of anything off-color."

"Tell yuh all about it tomorrow," Hatfield said wearily. "Right now we'd better be headin' back to town with the prisoners, and

to get the boys patched up. Leave two men here to look after the ship and them cows. I'll tell the boys up to the spread to ride down here tomorrow and run 'em back where they belong. I reckon the customs authorities will take over the ship. It's sort of in their line, seein' as she was engaged in smugglin'."

CHAPTER XX

Vindication

QUICKLY the possemen rode off with their captives, taking with them also the bodies of the slain special deputies. The moon hung high in the sky, silvering the waters of the bay, and casting a weird sheen over the vast reaches of the desert. Coffin Mountain loomed grim and sinister as usual, looking down undisturbed on this latest chapter of its dark and bloody history.

Hatfield followed the cavalcade, riding beside Sheriff Baylor. Worn out as they were, they rode in silence for the most part. Where the Pasajero flowed past the Bar A ranchhouse, Hatfield pulled up.

"See yuh tomorrow, Sheriff," he told Baylor. "I want to bring Mary Allison along to town with me. There are several things she'll be interested in hearin', and I figger she ought to be there when her dad gets outa jail."

Along with everythin' else, yuh gonna show Crane Allison didn't kill Ward Grimes?" asked the startled sheriff.

"Reckon so." Hatfield smiled. "He shore didn't kiss him—pity he didn't. Grimes had lived too long as it was. He served a useful purpose by hangin' on a spell, though. Gave me one of my first leads on Carter Renshaw."

Too weary to talk any more, Hatfield did not see Mary Allison that night. He slipped into his room quietly and was asleep as soon as he hit the bed. . . .

Hatfield and Mary rode to Lorenzo together the next afternoon.

As if to celebrate the return of peace and order to the section, the Nueces country was showing what it could do in the way of a perfect day. The autumn sun poured down a flood of gold. A mystic purple haze swathed the hills, softening and mellowing the crags and pinnacles until even grim Coffin Mountain was a vision of loveliness, robed in violet and crowned with light.

No branch moved in the still air, no grass blade rustled. The sky above was tenderest blue, deepening to lilac, edged with saffron along the thin, fine line of the horizon.

Hatfield wore the silver star of the Rangers. His green eyes were sunny. He sat his great golden horse with careless grace. Mary Allison's bright hair was a smoldering glory in the sunlight. On her piquant face was an expression of quiet happiness, but there also was a slightly wistful look in her wide blue eyes.

Mostly in silence, they rode the old, old Trail of the Travelers that had seen so much and knew so much and was wise in the ways of men. Lorenzo was seething with excitement when they arrived in town. Men stood in groups and stared at the tall form of the Lone Wolf as he rode past. In front of the bank building, Hatfield pulled Goldy to a halt.

"Wait a minute," he told Mary. "I got a chore to do."

He dismounted, strode up to the building, ripped the reward notice from its fastening and tore it across twice. Then he entered the bank. Heedless of the stares of the bank employees, he crossed the outer room to Sime Price's private office and flung the door open.

The bank president looked up, decidedly startled, as Hatfield entered. The Ranger walked up to his desk and flung the torn reward notice upon it.

"Why—why, what does this mean?" gulped Price.

"It means," Hatfield told him sternly, "that yuh're not offerin' any more rewards for dead bank robbers. Law enforcement is goin' back into the hands of proper enforcement officers."

Old Sime started to swell up like a spring bullfrog, but the look in Hatfield's eyes struck the words unuttered from his lips.

"Get yore hat and coat and come along with me to the sheriff's office," Hatfield ordered.

"Yuh—yuh mean I'm under arrest?" quavered Price.

Some of the sternness left Hatfield's face. His lips quirked slightly at the corners.

"Nope," he said. "Mebbe yuh ought to be, but yuh're not. Yuh're goin' there to listen to some things. And before yuh're finished," he added grimly, "I've a notion yuh're goin' to be sweatin' more'n yuh are now. Get goin'."

Old Sime "got going," without protest. With Hatfield towering beside him, leading Goldy, he walked up the street to Sheriff Baylor's office.

Hatfield gestured him to enter, and paused to help Mary dismount. He and the girl went up the steps together.

HATFIELD nodded to Baylor, and to old Crane Allison, who was with the sheriff at his desk, placed a chair for Mary, and sat down. With a light of amusement in his green eyes as he surveyed the expectant group, he deftly rolled a cigarette and lighted it.

"Well, I'm ready to answer yore question of last night, Sheriff," he said. "I first got to thinkin' about Carter Renshaw because of the way he walked."

"The way he walked!" blurted the lawman.

Hatfield nodded, and puffed on his cigarette.

"That's right. Renshaw was particular to intimate that he had been a cattleman over in the Big Bend country all his life. He'd been a cowman in the Big Bend, all right, but he had also been a deep water sailor, and for years. I noted his walk first off. He had the walk of a man who had spent a lot of time on the deck of a ship.

"Renshaw had what's called the 'sailor's roll.' I didn't think anything of it right away, but when I learned more about him, I realized that he made it a point never to mention anything about his seafarin'. That made me wonder. Besides, I'd already started wonderin' a little about him because of somethin' else."

He paused, regarding his cigarette with a contemplative eye. His hearers sat tensely expectant.

"Recollect, Sheriff," he went on then, "the morning Ward Grimes was found to have died in Doc White's office? Renshaw, when he came here to tell Allison the news, mentioned that he had been with Grimes the night before and left him, to all appearances, well on the road to recovery. I reckon Grimes was well on the road to recovery when Renshaw dropped in to see him, but when Renshaw left, closin' the door of his room and tellin' Doc that Grimes was asleep, Grimes was dead."

"Yuh mean to say Renshaw killed him?" exclaimed Crane Allison.

"He did," Hatfield said flatly.

"But Doc White said Grimes died of natural causes—a thrombosis, I think he called it."

"Yes, that's what Doc believed." Hatfield nodded. "But he was wrong. Doc had no reason to believe otherwise, though, and he certainly had no reason to think Carter Renshaw might have been responsible for Grimes' death."

The sheriff shook his head in bewilderment.

"How in blazes did you catch on?" he asked.

JIM HATFIELD smiled, and paused to roll another cigarette.

"Remember me askin' Doc if there was anywhere in town I could buy peaches? And Doc said there wasn't a peach in town at that time of the year. Well, when I stepped into the room where Grimes' body lay, I distinctly smelled the odor of peaches. As it happens, hydrocyanic acid, one of the deadliest and swiftest poisons known, smells like peach blossoms.

"The odor is unusual, and distinctive. And hydrocyanic stops the heart and leaves outward symptoms similar to those resultin' from death by thrombosis. Renshaw was the last person to see Grimes alive. When he entered that room, he undoubtedly carried a vial of hydrocyanic acid with him. He managed somehow to give Grimes a drop or two, or a good whiff of the gas—knowing that would be all that was necessary in order to cause death."

"But why would he want to kill Grimes?" asked the bewildered sheriff.

"Because Grimes was a weak sister, despite his settin' up to be a salty hombre," Hatfield declared. "Allison gunnin' him up broke his nerve completely. Renshaw must have decided he had to be done in, for safety's sake. He knew too much, and wasn't to be trusted. Most of Renshaw's outfit were cold propositions, but he slipped on Grimes, just like he slipped on that drunken deputy marshal over to Dynham."

"Grimes was sort of different from his brother," remarked the sheriff.

Hatfield smiled slightly.

"Grimes never had a brother, so far as I was able to learn," he observed. "Preston Grimes, so called, was not his brother but was one of Renshaw's bunch playin' the part. I got suspicious of Preston Grimes when he and Renshaw made such a strong play of not gettin' along. That row between Peasley Wal-

lace and Preston Grimes in the Rambler was a phony if there ever was one.

"When a gent reaches for a gun and aims to use it, he don't pull it straight up from his holster, with the muzzle pointin' to the floor. He drags it back, with the business end trained on the gent he aims to down. Wallace pulled his gun straight up and let Grimes get the drop on him. That set me thinkin' about Grimes.

"So I wrote to Captain McDowell, and he got in touch with the bank over in Louisiana from which Preston Grimes was supposed to have brought his credentials. The bank wrote back they'd never heard of such a person.

"The credentials had been forged, of course, so's Preston Grimes could get hold of the Rambler, a valuable property."

OLD Crane Allison was staring, almost incredulously.

"And Ward Grimes really did kill my son in cold blood, then?" he asked, his face tense with emotion.

"He did," Hatfield said, a note of deep sympathy in his voice. "To get the reward money offered for dead bank robbers. When Price put up that reward notice, and the other bankers in the country followed suit, Renshaw, who never missed a chance to cash in on things, saw a good opportunity to pick up some easy money. Tom Allison was one of the victims, just as that pore devil of a miner over to Dynham was, and the two Mexicans at Armstrong. The two hellions who are locked up in the cells now will testify to that. Grimes followed Tom Allison into the bank and shot him down in cold blood."

"How do yuh know that?" Sime Price interpolated in feeble protest. "Allison did come into the bank and demand money."

Hatfield smiled, a smile that had little of mirth in it.

"He did, because he had every reason to think he had a right to," he said. "Being two-thirds drunk, he acted queer and awkward. Tom Allison came into the bank to get a check cashed."

"To get a check cashed!"

In answer to the exclamation, Hatfield drew a soiled blotter from his pocket. He handed it to the sheriff, gestured to Price to help the peace officer examine it.

"Yuh'll notice it has been used but once," he said. "See if yuh can read what's written on it."

CHAPTER XXI

Hasta Luego

UNABLE to believe what he was hearing, the sheriff stared at Hatfield. Seeing the Ranger's steady gaze, the sheriff laboriously traced the blurred, inverted impressions on the blotter with his forefinger.

"Looks like a one, and a couple naughts up here," he muttered. "Uh-huh—that's what it is, because right below it is 'one hundred' spelled out. And there's somethin' else before them figgers up above. I can't make out the first word. It's all blurred. But the second one—'A—l—l—' By gosh, it's Allison,' that's what it is!"

"Yes," Hatfield said quietly. "'Pay to the order of Tom Allison, one hundred dollars' is how the first line, printin' and writin', would read. This is the blotter Ward Grimes used to blot the check he gave Tom Allison in the back room of the Rambler. What Allison was reachin' for when he was shot was not a gun, but the check he had in his pocket." His eyes bored into the white-faced banker. "Catch on, Price?" he asked. But Price was beyond speech, right then.

"Everything was tying up, yuh see," Hatfield continued. "I'd already placed Renshaw as a man with seafarin' experience. Also I had about decided that the cows widelooped from hereabouts were bein' taken out by way of the sea. There was no place else for 'em to go. It was ridiculous to figger the wideloopers was runnin' herd after herd clean across the desert to Mexico.

"That flare on top of Coffin Mountain was undoubtedly a signal fire. What else but to notify the smugglin' ship standin' off shore to put in for a load. One of the owlhoots we downed when they made the try for Slim Dryden's shippin' herd was packing a box of snuff, a strange thing for a cowhand to be carryin', but a favorite kind of eatin' tobacco with seamen.

"Most of the owlhoots that had been cashed in were Apaches or Apache breeds, somethin' hardly ever seen this far east. Renshaw came here from the Big Bend, and brought his hands with him. The Big Bend, and on west, is Apache country. Renshaw brought the breeds from there, too—part of an outfit he worked with over there, accordin' to what the prisoners we have said. He never used

his regular ranch hands in his owlhoot business. I doubt if most of 'em even knew anything about it. That way he avoided anything that might tie him up with what was goin' on.

"Also, he was where he could know all that was taking place in the country. He was at Dryden's place playin' poker the night before Dryden corralled his shippin' herd in that canyon. Of course he learned about it while he was at Dryden's place. He knew all about the Bar A herds, too. He knew about the silver ingots secretly shipped by way of the Dynham stage. He was a solid citizen with connections, and was in a position to learn things."

"That's right," put in Sheriff Baylor. "I recollect him speaking about what the Dynham stage packed the day he came in to raise ructions about one of his herds bein' widelooped."

Hatfield nodded, and reached for his tobacco.

"Yes, he pretended to lose stock, too, of course. That was part of his cover-up game. Chances are he did have his hellions run off some cows from his place. He didn't stand to lose anything, havin' a ready sale for 'em. He just shipped 'em by water instead of rail, and that fooled the honest hands he had workin' for him. He had plenty of savvy, all right.

"What gave me my first line on why he wanted the Bar A spread was the way he spoke Spanish. The day Mary and I were drygulched on the Pasajero Trail, a Mexican came into the Rambler and spoke to Renshaw in Spanish. Renshaw answered him in the same language, but he didn't speak the kind of Spanish the Mexican spoke—the kind of Spanish most folks in Mexico speak. He spoke much purer Spanish, but not quite Castilian. He used the kind of Spanish the people of Chile and Peru speak. More'n likely he'd been in Chile in the course of his wanderin's over the world, had spent considerable time there—enough to learn the language, and learn it well."

"But why did he want my ranch?" asked Mary Allison. "It is not as good a spread as the Double R."

Hatfield smiled at the girl.

"No, it ain't as good a spread for cattle raisin'," he agreed, "but it is a heap more valuable." He turned to Sheriff Baylor. "Fetch me that paper out of the safe," he said.

BAYLOR complied with the request. Hatfield spread the paper on the sheriff's desk.

"After Preston Grimes bought the Bar A mortgage from the Lorenzo bank, I did some hard thinkin'," he said. "I knew right then that there was somethin' valuable on the Bar A. The question was, what and where? Most of the spread was regulation rangeland—but the salt flats down by the bay are different. It is an unusual stretch of land down there, a rather unique geological formation.

"I got curious about that land and did a little investigatin'. I saw that the terrain is strikin'ly like the great nitrate deposits in Chile. I took some specimens and sent 'em to the State University to be analyzed. The report states that the land is plenty rich in nitrates, the percentage considerably higher even than the world-famous Chilean deposits.

"Renshaw had been to the Chile nitrate fields. He understood the worth of the Bar A deposit and set out to get control of it. It was his big chance. He could tie onto the Bar A, get rid of his owlhoot connections, just as he got rid of Ward Grimes, and set up as a prosperous, respectable citizen. He might have got by with it, if, like the owlhoot brand does, plenty of times, he hadn't slipped up in a few little things."

"Nitrates," repeated Crane Allison. "What are they good for?"

"They're used to make fertilizer, explosives, and other things of commercial value," Hatfield explained to him. "That Bar A deposit is, of course, not nearly as large as the ones in Chile, but it's not small and is conveniently located for transportation to market. It won't make yuh a millionaire, Allison, but it'll put yuh in mighty comfortable circumstances and backlog yuh against bad seasons and so on."

Hatfield paused, smiling at his listeners. Finally the silence was broken by old Sime Price, who had been sitting with his head in his hands. Abruptly he straightened up and spoke.

"I done wrong about them infernal reward notices," he said. "I meant well, but I reckon I done wrong."

Crane Allison got to his feet. He walked over and placed a gnarled hand on the banker's bowed shoulders.

"I reckon we all do wrong, at one time or another, Sime," he said gently. "Anyhow, it takes a honest man with nerve to stand

up and admit he's made a mistake. I don't hold anythin' against yuh, Sime, and here is my hand on it."

The two old men shook hands, looking into each other's eyes.

"Well, I reckon that's about all," said Sheriff Baylor, bustling from behind his desk. "I'm goin' over and see Judge Wheeler. I reckon the judge will fix up the papers pronto. Crane ought to be turned loose by tomorrow mornin' at the latest."

Hatfield stood up, stretching his long arms above his head, and smiled down at them from his great height.

"Yes, I reckon that's about all," he repeated Baylor's words. "Time I was ridin'. Cap'n Bill will have another little chore lined up for me by the time I get back to the post. I'll start now. It's cooler out on the desert at night."

Mary Allison also rose.

"I'll ride with you as far as the ranchhouse," she said.

They rode out of town together.

The sunset was flaming scarlet and gold over Coffin Mountain when Hatfield pulled his great sorrel to a halt before the Bar A ranchhouse.

He sat smiling down at the bright-haired girl beside him. Her wide blue eyes gazed up into his.

"Will—will I see you again?" she asked.

Hatfield smiled. "A Ranger rides a long trail, little lady," he said. "A long trail, and a lone one. But even the longest trail comes to an end some time. So I won't say *'adios,'* but *'hasta luego.'* "

" 'Till we meet again,' " Mary Allison translated. "We'll let it go at that." Then, in soft tones, she gave him the farewell with which the folk of *Mejico* speed the well-loved departing one on his way: *"Vaya usted con Dios!* Go you with God!"

Once Hatfield was far down the old, old Trail of the Travelers, he turned and waved his hand. Then the watching girl saw him face to the front, square his shoulders and ride on into the sunset, tall and graceful, atop his great golden horse, to where there was work to be done and danger and adventure waited.

The Lone Wolf was on the trail!

ADVENTURERS WANTED!

YOUNG men reading their morning papers back in 1822, in the hope of finding a job, came across the following ad:

"To enterprising young men. The subscriber wishes to engage one hundred young men to ascend the Missouri River to its source, there to be employed for two or three years. For particulars inquire of Major Andrew Henry neat the lead mines in the county of Washington; or of the subscriber near St. Louis. *William H. Ashley.*"

Soon ambitious young Americans who wished to better themselves started applying at the offices of Mr. Ashley and his partner, Andrew Henry—lank youths in homespun from Kentucky mountains, farm lads who had sneaked away from home, tough stevedores from the river boats, grocery clerks, and many others who wanted adventure. This was the start of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, whose business it was to invade Indian country without benefit of the Army or any law, and to return with valuable pelts.

Today the map of the United States bears the names of many of the young men who applied for jobs at Ashley's office. One of them was Jim Bridger, who quit a position as blacksmith apprentice, and who later became one of the greatest scouts and trail blazers of the Northwest.

—*Bill Anson*

Sally Oldfield walked between the Doc and the sheriff, linking her arms in theirs

DOC SWAP HIRES A HAND

By BEN FRANK

Utterly Useless is his name, but Old Doc Swap's weary helper proves plumb useful when tradin' hits a snag!

OLD Doc Swap, fat hands in the pockets of his baggy pants, a deep scowl wrapped around his whiskery face, stood with his back against Cy Pulley's red and white barber pole. Some place down inside his oversized middle, he had a lonely, lost feeling.

"Wouldn't care if that ole fool sheriff busted a arm," he growled.

From behind the jail came the clang of a horseshoe against an iron stake, and Doc's scowl deepened.

"Wouldn't care if he busted both arms," he amended.

From now on until after the Dry Bluffs horseshoe pitching championship was settled for another year, Doc reckoned life wouldn't be worth shucks, for Sheriff MacLoyd, gearing himself for the championship game, wouldn't have time to do any swapping.

For forty years, Doc and the sheriff of Bluff County had been bitter rivals in the two occupations dearest to Doc's heart—fiddle playing and swapping. Now, with

MacLoyd out of the swapping picture for at least another week, life held little interest for Doc.

Doc himself didn't care a hoot for the game. There were two reasons for this. One, he couldn't hit the broad side of a barn with a horseshoe. Two, he was built wrong for stooping to pick up horseshoes. But Sheriff MacLoyd, who was built on the same pattern as a rake handle, had been Dry Bluffs champion for twenty years. And he intended to keep on being champion as long as he could lift a horseshoe.

The old swapper tuned his ears for another disheartening clang of steel. It didn't come, and his scowl turned to a look of puzzlement. Tightening his fancy Stetson—he'd swapped a wind-broken old horse for the hat and considered it a highlight in his swapping career—over his bald head, he waddled across the narrow, dusty street toward the sun-warped, cracker-box jail. Something mighty un-ordinary, he knew, must have happened to break into Sheriff MacLoyd's practise. And Doc never liked to miss out on anything out of the ordinary. Especially when it concerned his old friendly-enemy, the sheriff.

He puffed around the corner of the jail and came to a dead halt. A youngish man with a sad, pale face and dressed in a much abused and wrinkled green-checked store suit, lay sprawled in the shade of a lone cottonwood. Within two feet of his uncombed shock of bright orange hair, stood one of MacLoyd's horseshoe stakes.

MAC LOYD, his bony face as red as his new, flaming silk shirt, towered over the young man.

"Yuh can't lay there!" the sheriff bellowed.

"This is the only tree shade I've saw fer a week." The young man yawned. "Why can't I lay here?"

"It ain't safe," MacLoyd answered. "I might brain yuh with a hoss-shoe."

"A good player wouldn't," the young man answered without opening his eyes.

Doc smiled happily and edged closer. Nothing he liked better than seeing MacLoyd riled to the point of exploding.

"I'd like yuh to know that I am the champeen of Bluff County, young feller!" the sheriff roared.

"Reckon it's safe here, then," the young man murmured.

"Nope," Doc said. "I reckon it ain't. That ole buzzard like as not will let one slip and bust yore head in."

MacLoyd stiffened with a jerk and turned on his bony, bowed legs. His thin lips puckered, and he sent an angry, hissing stream of tobacco juice halfway across the court house lawn.

"Lissen, yuh fat, mouthy ole maverick," he exploded, "yuh stay outa this! Yuh—"

"Oh, there you are," a sweet, feminine voice cooed.

Both Doc and the sheriff immediately lost their scowls, and smiled. The young man opened one eye, took a look at the vision of loveliness that had come around the corner of the jail, opened the other eye and sat up.

The girl, Sally Oldfield, linked her smooth, white arms with Doc's fat right and the sheriff's skinny left and gave each in turn a red-lipped smile.

"I'm so glad I found you two old dears together," she said. "You know, the professor and I are being married week after next, and we're giving a big wedding dance in the evening. I want one of you to play for the dance."

MacLoyd gulped. "Which one?"

"Oh." Sally smiled. "It really doesn't matter. I'll let you two decide that."

She unlinked her arms, gave her golden head a toss and started on her way.

"Thanks so much," she called back. "I'll be counting on one of you."

The young man sank back to the ground and closed his eyes.

"Just my luck," he said sadly. "Them kind is allus took before I see 'em."

Neither Doc nor the sheriff heard him. They were eying each other with hostility.

"Reckon I better do the fiddlin'," MacLoyd said. "Yuh ain't so good."

"Who ain't so good?" Doc fumed. "Why, yuh second cousin to a snake, I can play rings around—"

"Who's the professor?" the young man interrupted.

"Professor John Paul Jones Stuenkal from the East," Doc answered. "He comes here ever' year to study rocks." He turned back to the sheriff. "I'll do the playin', and they ain't no use'n yuh objectin'."

"I'll tell yuh what," MacLoyd said, "I'll flip yuh this half-dollar to see who plays for the dance."

Doc felt a tingle of mistrust. MacLoyd was as good with a flipped coin as he was with a pair of horseshoes. Besides there was

a finality about a flipped coin that Doc's bargaining nature disapproved of heartily.

"Mebbe," he said quickly, "we could fix us up some kind of a swap to see who'll do the fiddlin'?"

MacLoyd's pale eyes narrowed. "Ain't got no time for swappin'," he said. "Besides yuh ain't got nothin' worth havin' outside youre red-gold fiddle."

Doc shuddered. For years MacLoyd had been trying to get Doc's beloved fiddle. Besides, if he swapped it to the sheriff, he wouldn't have anything to play on for the dance. Obviously, MacLoyd was setting a trap, and Doc felt a trickle of sweat run down toward his left eye.

"Let's don't get in no hurry about decidin' who's goin' to do the fiddlin'," he said cautiously. "Why, one of us might up and bust a arm before then."

THE suspicion on MacLoyd's thin face doubled.

"Doc," he said, picking up the horseshoes, "don't yuh try nothin' funny, like bustin' one of my arms, or I'll lock yuh up."

"Phooey!" Doc snorted. "If I was goin' to bust any part of yuh, it'd be yore thick head!"

The young man broke into the harangue with a loud but musical snore. MacLoyd cussed and gouged him awake with the toe of his number twelve boot. The young man sighed and opened one eye.

"Get up and get out!" MacLoyd said. "I gotta practise my hoss-shoe pitchin'."

"Used to play some hoss-shoes myself," the young man said without interest. "Too much movin' around, so I give it up. Took up mumblety-peg, only I lost my knife. Now, I do card tricks. Want to see one?"

"Ain't got no time fer card tricks," MacLoyd said. "Scat!"

The young man shook his orange head and closed the eye.

"Kinda like this shade," he said. "Reckon this is a public place, and it's a free country."

A crafty look came into MacLoyd's bony face. "Who yuh workin' for?" he asked.

"Ain't workin'," came the answer.

"Vagrancy is ag'in the law in Dry Bluffs," the sheriff said triumphantly. "Yuh can take yore choice of gettin' out of town, or thirty days in jail."

That brought the young man to a sitting position, and a look of deep sorrow filled his pale face.

"I shore hate to move," he murmured, "but I ain't one who goes much for jail life."

Doc, an innocent smile on his round, whiskery face, laid a fat hand on the young man's shoulder.

"Son," he said kindly, "I'll give yuh a job so's yuh won't be a vagrant. From now on yuh're my hired hand!"

The young man looked a little frightened.

"I ain't much of a hand to work," he said.

"Don't let it worry yuh," Doc said blandly. "Yore job is just layin' here under this shade tree."

The young man shuddered.

"I don't hanker to lay under this tree now that it's work," he said. "Besides, since yuh're my new boss, I reckon yuh've got to feed me. And I ain't et for some time."

MacLoyd stepped forward, spat maliciously and grinned.

"Doc, yuh've hired yoreself a hand," he said. "Now it's up to you to keep him well fed. If I hear of you mistreatin' yore help in any way, I'll likely have to lock yuh up for assult and battery, or cruelity."

Doc blinked rapidly and reckoned that he was being took. Nothing would please the sheriff more than to settle the dance playing dispute by locking Doc up on some trumped-up pretext. Anger stirred up through the old swapper, and he felt his face growing red.

"Why, yuh dad-blasted ole faker," he yipped, "yuh can't do nothin' of the kind. Yuh—yuh—"

MacLoyd chuckled wickedly. "Heh, heh! Can't I!"

Doc drew a deep breath and got back his voice.

"Yuh'll regret this!" he bellowed at the sheriff. "Not only will I play fer the dance and make yuh like it, but I'll swap that fancy red shirt right off yore skinny back!"

MacLoyd laughed so hard he choked on his cud of tobacco.

"Big talk," he sputtered. "Mighty windy talk, too."

Doc crammed his fancy Stetson down to his ears and turned toward the street.

"Come on," he said to his new hired man.

Old Doc Swap learned three things about his new man before noon. First, he went by the name of Useless Utterly. Second, he had an unlimited capacity for food. Third, he wasn't afraid of work—he could lie down beside it and go peacefully to sleep.

Cussing into his ragged whiskers, Doc watched Useless start to curry his sleek bays

and fall asleep with his back propped against the manger.

Doc reckoned then that it was time to figure out some way of getting rid of the young man. Also, Doc had another problem to work out—swapping MacLoyd out of playing for Sally Oldfield's dance and getting the sheriff's red silk shirt to-boot.

WHENEVER Doc had a problem to solve, there was just one thing for him to do—go to Sugar Valley on a swappin' spree. Nesters were beginning to settle up the valley, and nesters were swappers. Doc could do his best thinking when trading. So he harnessed up his covered wagon, aroused Useless long enough to get him into the wagon, and headed for Sugar Valley.

Doc made his first stop at Add Trotter's homestead.

Add, who liked to sit in his rocking chair and play solitaire, was sitting in the shade of an unhappy oak. Add lifted his leathery face.

" 'Lo, Doc," he greeted Doc sadly. "Light awhile. But don't try to do no swappin'. I ain't in a mood for it."

Doc climbed to the ground, followed by Useless Utterly.

"What's got yuh down, Add?" Doc asked cheerfully.

Add sighed. "Got my playin' cards mixed up with some ole newspapers an' started a fire with 'em. Now I ain't got no way amusin' myself except by goin' fishin'."

Useless opened one eye.

"Speakin' of cards," he murmured, dragging out a ragged deck of cards, "I do card tricks. Ever see this here trick about—"

Add's eyes fixed hungrily on the deck of cards.

"Give yuh fifty cents for them cards, feller," he said.

"He ain't sellin' 'em," Doc snapped.

"Now, Doc!" Useless protested.

"I'm yore boss," Doc said firmly. "You do as I say, or I'll fire yuh, and the sheriff'll give yuh thirty days fer vagrancy!" Doc smiled blandly at Add. "Useless, howsomeever, might do some swappin'—"

When Doc drove away from Add Trotter's, Useless was minus the cards, but Doc had an old cow bell, a wooden water bucket, a weed hook, and a can of fish worms to-boot. He hadn't had any trouble getting Add to throw the worms in, for Add reckoned he'd rather stay in his rocking chair and play solitaire than go fishing any day.

Useless found energy enough to sit with Doc on the sagging spring seat. When they reached Doc's favorite camping ground on the bank of Sugar Creek, the young man eyed the placid water with some show of interest.

"Used to fish 'fore I took up card tricks," he murmured. "Kinda wish I had some fishin' tackle, now that we got us some worms."

They rounded a clump of willows and came upon old Cy Oldfield, his daughter Sally and her future husband, Professor John Paul Jones Stuenkal. Lying scattered about the Oldfield springwagon lay a collection of fishing poles and tackle.

Doc saw right off that there was some tension among the three. Cy Oldfield's face wore a look of supreme disgust. Sally seemed unhappy, and the tall, thin professor appeared to be considerably fussed.

"Fine evenin' fer fishin'," Doc observed cheerfully.

"It would be," Cy put in tartly, "if John Paul Jones hadn't forgot to put in the bait."

The professor ran his fingers through his thinning hair.

"I was engrossed in a fossil at the time," he said. "The bait slipped my mind."

"He ain't got no mind," Cy said under his breath.

Sally came to the professor's rescue. "Oh, Doc, have you decided who's going to play for the wedding dance?"

"Me," Doc answered. "Ain't no doubt about that."

Useless sighed and opened both eyes.

"We got us some worms, but no fish tackle," he murmured.

Five minutes later, the Oldfield party was happily fishing with half a can of worms, for which they had given Doc a share of their picnic lunch, a fishing pole and an old, broken buggy axle to-boot. Doc was a great hand for boot.

USELESS picked up the newly acquired fishing pole and started for the creek. Halfway there, he got tired, lay down on the grass and went to sleep.

Cussing into his whiskers, Doc went on to the creek and caught enough sun-perch for breakfast. When he came back to the wagon, he found Useless there ahead of him, finishing the last of the picnic lunch.

"Shore is good, Doc," Useless grinned.

"Figured I had it comin' to me, seein' as how yuh swapped off my cards."

Doc didn't say anything. He just cussed some more and reckoned that if he didn't devise a way of getting rid of his hired hand pronto, likely as not the long, hollow jasper would start eating the harness off the bays.

The next morning, the sun came up like a flame, and the usual south breeze died down to nothing.

Useless shuddered and crawled under the canvas of the old covered wagon.

"Ain't no fit day for a human to be outside," he said. "A feller'd likely get sunstroke."

Doc climbed up on the spring seat and headed the bays down Sugar Creek Trail. Never before had he met anyone as lazy as his hired man. In fact, if it hadn't been for furnishing him with food and for the worry about who was going to play for Sally's wedding dance, Doc would have enjoyed having Useless around just to hear him snore. He had such a happy, musical snore.

A rider came around the covered wagon and pulled a willing and sad looking buckskin to a stop. He was Ham Brady, one of MacLoyd's occasional deputies. He trapped in winters and loafed in summers and chewed finecut with the same relish that a hog eats corn.

"Hotter'n seven kinds of Hades," Ham observed. "And with me havin' to ride over to Red Dog to see about a fight a couple of jaspers had!"

Useless poked his orange head out from under the canvas.

"Fight?" He blinked. "Had a fight myself oncet. Over a hoss-shoe game. Seems as though—"

"Hoss shoes!" Ham unloaded an explosive cud. The tail of his squirrel-skin cap—Ham wore the cap all the time—got into his eyes, and he brushed it away with a brisk cuss word. "The next time I hear anybody say anything about hoss-shoes, I'm goin' to shoot him!"

"What's the matter with hoss-shoes?" Doc asked mildly.

"If old MacLoyd wasn't so busy practisin' for the championship, he could of gone hisself to Red Dog," Ham explained. "But no, he sends me! What I ought to do is crawl off under a shade tree along the crick and fish. Only I ain't got no tackle."

"We got us some tackle," Useless murmured. "Might sell it."

"Ain't fer sale," Doc snapped. "Might swap, though."

"Now, Doc!" Useless protested. "Don't yuh ever have no hankerin' for money?"

Doc didn't have. He was a swapper, not a salesman. He ignored his sad-faced hired man and began to talk swap to Ham.

For the fishing tackle, Doc got an old shotgun with a broken spring, a pocket knife and a pair of green dice to-boot.

Useless brightened when he saw the dice.

"Used to be right handy with them things," he said. "That was 'fore I took up hoss-shoe pitchin'."

Ham cussed with eloquence at the word "horse-shoe" and headed his buckskin toward Sugar Creek.

Useless took the dice in his oversized paw and studied them critically.

" 'Course," he went on, "these here'd take a little fixin' 'fore they'd come up seven ever' time, but—Doc how about loanin' me yore new knife."

Doc lent him the knife and drove on along the trail. Useless retired to the canvas shade and began to work on the dice with the knife.

A mile farther on, Doc turned in at Mule Turner's place. Ida, Mule's husky spouse, was down on bended knees, pulling weeds from around the rusty yard fence. Mule stood nearby, offering advice but no help.

Doc swept off his fancy hat and bowed.

"You folks is really makin' things look lovely," he said.

Mule looked pleased. "That's what I told Ida."

Ida looked up. Sweat streaked her ruddy face, and there was an angry glint in her eyes.

"Pullin' weeds ain't no picnic!" she panted. "Cuttin' 'em would be a sight easier and quicker."

"Ain't got no cutter, though," Mule added.

Slowly Useless lifted his sad eyes from the green dice and fished out the weed-hook from among Doc's swappin' goods.

"Got this here cutter, but Doc won't sell it."

Doc smiled happily. Useless was catching on fast.

"Might do some swappin', howsomeever," he offered.

When Doc drove away from the Turners', he was without a weed-hook, but in its place, he had a loaf of Ida's homemade bread, a can of watermelon preserves, a ball of twine,

and five shotgun shells to-boot. Even if Doc's shotgun wouldn't shoot, he hadn't been able to resist talking Mule into throwing the shells in to-boot.

The wheels of the covered wagon had hardly got settled into the deep, dusty ruts of the Sugar Creek Trail when Sheriff MacLoyd came driving up in his topless buggy, one big foot dangling on the outside, a milk-curdling scowl on his bony face.

Doc didn't miss the scowl. Just seeing it made him forget the heat and feel happy.

"Fine day to be out in the country," he said. "On a nice, sunny day like this, a feller can see for miles—"

"Ain't out seein'," MacLoyd cut in darkly. "Out on official business. Somebody stole some chickens from ole man Dixon, an' I got to go investigate."

"Too bad," Doc sighed. "Kind of cuts in on yore hoss-shoe practise, don't it?"

The sheriff flexed his right arm and looked worried.

"Doc," he admitted, "I'm shore jittery about my game this year. Seems like I'm gettin' muscle bound."

Doc felt his happiness increase, and a tingle of anticipation ran through him as an idea for a swap leaped into his mind. But his round face remained as innocent as a baby's.

"What yuh need is to relax," he said soberly. "Useless hand me that shotgun and them shells."

Useless sighed and cast a longing glance at the loaf of bread and the watermelon preserves, which Doc wisely had put where he could keep an eye on them.

"I'm almost too weak to lift that gun," he said.

But in spite of his professed weakness, he handed it and the shells to Doc.

The old swapper beamed on MacLoyd.

"Ain't nothin' like a little huntin' to relax a man."

"That's right," Useless chimed in. "Remember once when I was about to get in a hoss-shoe game. Was all tied up in knots. Went huntin' and when I come back, never played so good a game in all my life."

MacLoyd was impressed.

"Might get me a few jackrabbits on the way home," he conceded.

"Make yuh as fit as a fiddle," Useless declared, closing his eyes. "Course, Doc ain't got no business ability, so yuh'll have to swap him for the gun."

The word "fiddle" made MacLoyd and Doc exchange dagger glances, but neither mentioned the coming wedding dance.

Immediately, the two old cronies got into a bitter wrangle over the terms of the trade and argued loudly and profanely to the accompaniment of Useless Utterly's gentle, musical snores. Doc tried to get the sheriff's red silk shirt in the deal, but MacLoyd threatened to leave before the swap came to a head.

But Doc couldn't let him do that. To Doc, missing a swap with MacLoyd, and maybe beating him a little to-boot, would be a blight on his reputation for years to come.

At last the sheriff drove away with the gun and the shells. Doc had a humped-back buggy whip, a gallon water jug, a fancy box of matches, a worn out pair of overshoes, and a moth-eaten laprobe to-boot. And a big smile on his whiskery face.

He'd forgotten to mention the fact that the gun wouldn't shoot, and the sheriff hadn't found it out—yet.

Useless shook his orange head sadly and stared at accumulation of "swappin' " goods.

"Beats all, Doc, what yuh've got fer that deck of cards," he said. "A cowbell, water bucket, busted buggy axle, pocket knife, a ball of twine, buggy whip, jug, overshoes, some right purty matches, a laprobe, and some grub what I could eat right now. But if yuh'd let me handle things, we'd have had us some cash money."

"What'd anybody want money for?" Doc asked crossly.

"Why, I allus had a hankerin' to take a train ride," Useless sighed. "But it takes cash money to buy a ticket."

"Phooey!" Doc grunted, and stared glumly straight ahead.

EVEN if he had done right well with the deck of cards, he was far from satisfied. His two problems—how to win over MacLoyd concerning the wedding dance and get the sheriff's shirt to-boot, and how to rid himself gracefully of his always-hungry hired man—remained unsolved.

Doc shuddered and swung the sleek bays to the right and up Bill Clink's tumbled-down shack. The water jug had made him think of Bill, not that Bill would likely be interested in water. But he might have a use for the jug, for Bill was a great hand for the kind of liquid refreshments that made him see things.

Doc climbed from the wagon with the jug snug under his fat arm. Useless followed with the moth-eaten laprobe over his shoulder and spread it out in the shade of Bill's shack. There was a faint gleam of excitement in his eyes, and the green dice cackled in his big fist.

Bill Clink came to the door and stood there on bare feet, eying Doc and the jug without interest.

Doc swept off his fancy hat and fanned his sweating face.

"Picked up just what yuh need," he said, holding out the jug. "Says I to myself, 'Bill'll shore want this jug.' So I hung onto it, even if a lot of fellers did try to trade for—"

Bill wiggled his toes and shook his shaggy head.

"Ain't got no need fer it no more, Doc," he said sadly. "I'm strictly on the water-wagon now."

Doc stared unbelievingly.

"Doc," Bill went on with a slight shudder, "when a man's house sprouts wings and starts flyin' around like a bird, it's time he switched to water."

His voice trailed off, and his bleary eyes came to a focus on an object at the side of his shack. Doc turned and saw Useless on his knees at the edge of the laprobe. The young man's big hand moved, and two green cubes leaped forth and rolled across the laprobe.

Useless' pale face wore a satisfied smile.

"Seven any way yuh throw 'em," he murmured.

Bill shuffled to the edge of the laprobe, picked up the dice and gave them a whirl. A four and a three stared him in the face. He beamed on Useless.

"How much yuh take fer 'em, young feller?" he asked.

Useless lost his smile, and a deep sigh escaped him. He lifted his eyes to Doc's round face and shook his head.

"Yuh'll have to dicker with my boss," he said sadly.

Bill Clink soon became the proud owner of a pair of crooked dice. In exchange, Doc got an old buggy wheel, two live chickens, a ragged shirt, and a pair of old rusty horseshoes to-boot. The shoes were too large for Doc's bays, but a trade wouldn't be a trade without something to-boot.

Useless hefted the horseshoes and shook his orange head.

"A mite heavier'n regulation hoss-shoes," he said, and tossed them into the wagon.

Then he turned his eyes on the two chickens, and his face lighted up like a moonlit sky.

"Allus had a hankerin' for fried chicken," he murmured.

Doc sighed. He reckoned those two chickens didn't have a Chinaman's chance to see the light of another day.

The old swapper and his hired man climbed into the covered wagon and headed back toward Sugar Creek. In camp late that afternoon, Useless, for the first time, showed a spark of energy. He dressed and cleaned the two chickens, while Doc got the campfire going.

After they'd eaten, Useless looked sadly about.

"Allus liked to play games after a good fillin' meal," he said. "But yuh swapped off my cards and my dice. Looks like I'm in for a time-draggin' evenin', unless yuh loan me that pocket knife, Doc."

Doc fished out the knife and handed it over.

Useless selected a spongy spot of ground and began a game of mumblety-peg. The low sun made his orange hair look like a brush fire. Doc, watching him, suddenly realized that his hired man was a wizard with the knife. He could make it do everything but talk. Vaguely he wondered if Useless was as good at playing other games as he was at this one.

Right in the middle of the game, two rannies from the Double O rode up in a cloud of dust.

The tall, skinny cowboy slid to the ground and stared at Useless' flashing knife.

"Been wantin' a knife like that for a long time," he said.

Useless sighed and stopped playing.

"Take a dollar for it," he whispered hoarsely.

But Doc heard him and leaped to his feet.

"That's my knife, an' it ain't fer sale!" he bellowed.

"Aw, Doc!" Useless protested, "Ain't I ever goin' to get no cash money so's I can take a train ride?"

Doc ignored him and turned to the skinny cowboy.

"We might figure us out a swap," he said blandly.

For the knife, Doc got an old lariat and a mouth harp to-boot.

The second cowboy, a five-by-five type,

had been eying the water jug with interest.

"Wild grapes along Sugar Creek is gettin' ripe," he muttered. "My grandpappy used to have a jug like that, Doc. Seems he used to fill it with wild grapes and let it set awhile."

"Yuh'd have to put sugar with 'em," Doc said without apparent interest. "About six weeks later, yuh'd be surprised at what yuh could pour out of a jug like that."

FIVE-BY-FIVE slid heavily to the ground and ran fat caressing fingers over the jug.

"Reckon yuh wouldn't take two-bits for it?"

Useless got to his feet and brushed off the knees of his green-checked suit.

"Can't buy no train ticket for two-bits," he said scornfully.

"Fifty cents?" Five-by-five offered.

"Ain't for sale," Doc snapped.

For the jug, Doc got a battered hammer and a sack of fence staples.

The rannies rode on, and Useless wandered unhappily about the covered wagon.

"Doc," he said. "Yuh're a hard man. Fust, yuh swap off my cards. And then my dice. And now, that pocket knife. Looks like I ain't got a thing to entertain myself with unless—"

He reached into the wagon and pulled out a piece of the broken buggy axle, picked up the hammer and drove the axle into the ground. After this, he fumbled around among the "swappin'" goods until he found the two rusty horseshoes, the ball of twine and the fancy box of matches.

Curious but silent, Doc watched him. Useless tied a match to the iron stake with the twine, backed away some fifteen steps, shut one eye, took aim and tossed one of the rusty horseshoes. It fell a trifle short.

"A mite heavy," Useless murmured.

The next throw was perfect. The shoe raked across the head of the match, bringing forth a bright flame.

Doc leaped to his feet.

"Reckon yuh couldn't do that again," he wheezed.

Useless dropped to the ground and closed his eyes.

"Reckon I could," he said without enthusiasm, "if someone was to tie another match on that stake and bring them shoes to me. Worked with a carnival once, and used to light matches that way all the time. Also, used to throw twenty-four ringers outa twenty-five tries. 'Course, I could have throwed twenty-five outa twenty-five. But it looks harder if yuh miss now and then. But hoss-shoe pitchin' ain't no fun, Doc. A feller has to move around too much."

Doc wiped his shiny bald head and grinned. He reckoned he plain, downright loved his hired man. In fact, if it wasn't for Useless' appetite, Doc would have made a life-long contract with him right then and there.

But remembering the appetite, he merely said: "Reckon we oughta be headin' for Dry Bluffs. Got a little work for yuh to do, Useless."

Mid-morning found old Doc Swap and Sheriff MacLoyd walking hurriedly along Dry Bluff's one street toward Doc's neat little cottage at the edge of town.

MacLoyd's face wore a look of mistrust, and he swore under his breath at every tenth step.

"Lis'en, yuh ole crook, why don't yuh tell me what yuh got to show me?" he kept asking.

"Yuh wouldn't believe me," was Doc's only answer.

They came to the cottage and went in. Doc led the way to a back window, and MacLoyd peered cautiously through it.

"Don't see nothin' but that fool hired man of yourn, sleepin' under a tree," he said.

Doc's fat hand reached up and wrapped around a length of twine. The twine ran through the window, over a limb of the tree under which Useless Utterly snored, and was attached to the cowbell, a device which Doc had wisely rigged up before going after the sheriff.

The old swapper yanked on the string, and the bell clanged. Useless yawned, got to his feet, looked unhappily toward the house and picked up two rusty horseshoes.

Slowly he shut one eye, and his long arm swung forward. The shoe landed with a dull thud at the other side of the back yard and neatly hugged a buggy axle stake. Useless put the other shoe squarely on top of the first, and with a look of distinct distaste on his sad, pale face, crossed the yard, picked up the shoes and repeated the performance.

Doc glanced slyly at Sheriff MacLoyd. The man's bony jaw sagged, and his pale eyes reminded Doc of two glass doorknobs.

"Figurin' some on enterin' my hired hand in the hoss-shoe pitchin' contest," Doc said blandly. "He can even light matches with them shoes."

(Concluded on page 89)

"Stand away from my girl, Rusty!" Jordan ordered

NEW YEAR'S AT COYOTE CREEK

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

Journeying on the last day of the year, Prospector Rusty Rawlins finds something far more precious than mere gold!

AT NOON on the last day of the year, Rusty Rawlins was a mile from the mining camp of Coyote Creek. His approach had been planned to arrive at a certain hour. He was a little ahead of his schedule.

He stopped his pony in a spot where the raw wind would not strike him or his mount. Getting out of his saddle, he groundhitched the pony, stretched his limbs, and walked around to get the blood circulating through his body properly. He had been in the saddle since dawn, when he had left the county seat.

There was but little snow on the ground, but present weather conditions gave indication of snow to come soon, perhaps before nightfall. If Coyote Creek wanted to start

the new year with the first big snow of the season, it was all right with Rusty Rawlins. He would be in the camp before the snow fell, snug in his cabin, where old "Pappy" Smeade was waiting for him.

He wondered if Pappy had received the letter he had written. Mail often was uncertain in that district. And it would be like Pappy to toss the letter on the shelf above the stove, unopened and unread, and leave it there. Reading a letter was a laborious task for Pappy. He could do it, given plenty of time, but reading a letter wasn't a chore he liked.

Rusty Rawlins had been away for almost four months. He had looked over mining properties in several other parts of the state. But mostly he had made the journey to get away from a bad situation and find peace of mind.

It all came back to him now, since he was so close to home. In his mind, he could see Lucy Bloon—her honey-colored hair, round face, big blue eyes, plump form, her easy laughter and bewitching dimples. He remembered how she had played him like a trout on a hook, and he realized now what a fool he must have appeared to be to others in the camp.

But he could turn the laugh on them now. During his absence he had learned some real values. Lucy Bloon's dalliance had served him well. Meltingly affectionate one minute, and keeping him at arm's length the next, ready to marry him on Monday and tilting her nose at him on Tuesday—that was at an end now. Rusty Rawlins had found himself during his absence. And he had found something else, too, something that would shock certain persons in Coyote Creek.

HE would arrive in time for the celebration of New Year's Eve, an annual ceremony in the camp. The little log church would be the scene of a "watch party." The better element of the camp would gather there, especially women and children, to listen to a program and, on the stroke of twelve, to wish one another a happy New Year.

Another element would celebrate in Bloon's general store and the camp's one saloon. There would be a fight or two, and some men would start the new year with black eyes and swollen noses. Such was life in Coyote Creek.

With the ground frozen to a depth of several feet, there would be little work done on mining claims. Some of the more ambitious, avid for gold, might resort to thawing. But the bulk of the population would loaf until spring, and let Nature do the thawing for them.

In an hour or so, Rusty knew, most of the men of the camp would be gathered at the store and saloon, talking over the events of the year just ending. That was when he intended to ride into the camp's one crooked street, which followed the bend of the creek. Everybody in the camp would know in a short time that he had returned. And they would wonder what he was going to do. Elmer Jordan would be wondering, for one.

Between Rusty Rawlins and Elmer Jordan was an enmity that had grown through the years. It had started over a mining claim dispute. On several occasions, friends had kept them from shooting it out.

Rivalry for the affections of Lucy Bloon, the storekeeper's daughter, had intensified their enmity. She had played one against the other, apparently unable to decide which to marry, or possibly just to show her power over men. Rusty saw that now.

He smiled a little as he went to his pony, put up the reins, and patted the pony's glossy neck. Swinging up into saddle, he gathered the reins and started on along the trail.

A spit of snow had started. He wondered if the downfall would hold off until after dark. If the pass between Coyote Creek and the county seat became choked with snow too soon . . . But he didn't want to think of that.

He rode up a long slope where the trail was winding, and came to the summit. Now the panorama of the Coyote Creek district was spread out before and below him. The tumbling creek, frozen in spots, wriggled across the land and through a gulch with high rock walls. The banks were dotted with cabins built on mining claims. The little town itself huddled against the rock cliffs at the mouth of the gulch, spirals of smoke issuing from the chimneys.

Rusty began the descent to the camp. The trail was rough and slippery, but it didn't bother his sure-footed pony. He watched ahead as he rode. He could see people going up and down the street, in and out of the buildings. He had timed his entrance well. Men were in from their claims for the New

Year's Eve celebration.

When he reached the floor of the gulch and was only a quarter-mile from the town, he put his pony into a lope, sagged comfortably to one side of the saddle and bent forward slightly. His hat was pulled down well over his head. His woolen muffler was up over chin and mouth almost to his eyes. He dropped the muffler around his neck now, so his face could be seen plainly and he could be instantly identified.

He cantered past the first buildings without anything happening. His cabin was beyond the town a short distance, for his claim was the second above Discovery. He hoped old Pappy Smeade was at the cabin instead of loafing in Ed Bloon's store.

He rode past the blacksmith shop, which was closed. Now the street narrowed. The store and saloon were on the right hand side and a couple of other establishments on the left. Men were on the walks and children were running around, some pulling hand sleds.

"It's Rusty Rawlins!" some small boy screeched. "Rusty has come home!"

That was the first recognition.

Rusty removed his right glove and put his hand down to swing his holster around in front. His naked hand hovered over the holster, from which the butt of a heavy gun protruded. That act was enough to give some of the watchers ideas.

Faces were at the windows as men peered out at him. Rusty rode on slowly, eyes to the front most of the time. As he passed the store, he saw Lucy Bloon's face as she looked out. He saw a smile flash across it, and she lifted her hand as if to wave at him. Rusty deliberately turned his head as if he had not seen her.

RUSTY came to the upper end of the street, asked the pony for a little speed, and rode to the cabin. Smoke was pouring from the chimney and the scent of frying bacon was on the crisp air. Old Pappy Smeade was at home, then. That was as Rusty had wanted it to be.

He stopped the pony in front of the cabin and got out of saddle. The cabin door was jerked open, and Pappy appeared, his long white whiskers whipping in the wind.

"Rusty!" he squeaked. "Boy, I'm shore glad to see yuh! Seems like ten years since yuh rode away."

They slapped each other on their backs. Rusty started leading the pony around to the lean-to stable behind the cabin, and Pappy went along despite the cold and the fact that he had not put on his coat.

"I could use some hot coffee and a mess of bacon and beans, Pappy," Rusty said.

"Coffee pot's on, Rusty. Bean are bilin' and bacon fryin'. I was fixin' me a snack before goin' downtown. Yuh got here in time for New Year's. Gosh, Rusty, I'm glad to see yuh!"

"Get back into the cabin before yuh get pneumonia," Rusty instructed. "Put on more bacon, and fry some spuds. What I mean, I'm hungry. I'll be there soon as I put up the pony."

Pappy Smeade hurried away, shivering now that he realized he was getting cold. Rusty led the pony into the lean-to, took off saddle and bridle and put on a halter, rubbed the pony down with a piece of cloth, and put a heavy blanket on him. He was glad to find that there was plenty of straw for bedding.

Then he hurried into the cabin, carrying only a stuffed saddle-bag. Rusty had been traveling light.

It was the same old cabin, except dirtier than when Rusty had left. Pappy Smeade wasn't much of a housekeeper. And the fact that the cabin had not been well-cleaned and things put straight meant something to Rusty.

"Did yuh get my letter, Pappy?" he asked.

"How's that—letter?"

"Yeah, a letter I mailed yuh two weeks ago. Didn't yuh get it?"

"Seems like. Let me think. Oh, shore! Yuh sent me a letter, huh? Must have put it around here some place."

"Didn't yuh read it?"

"Reckon I ain't had time, Rusty. I've been workin' the claim. Yuh rode away and left me in charge, and I wanted to do right by yuh. Got a bunch of dust and nuggets hid away for yuh. Been thawin' the last two weeks. Slow work, but it's been payin'."

Pappy put the coffee pot on the table with a couple of battered tin cups beside it. As he went back to the stove, Rusty poured a cup of the scalding hot coffee and began blowing on it. Pappy dished up boiled beans, and turned the bacon in the pan.

"Where's that letter?" Rusty demanded, as he began getting off some of his heavy outside clothes.

Rusty was almost six feet tall, and was

heavy in the chest and arms. He could handle himself well, as many men had found when they had tried to wrestle with him.

"Letter?" Pappy replied. "Look on the shelf."

Rusty found it there, unopened, and covered with dust. He put it into his pocket.

"Since yuh didn't open and read that letter, yuh'll have a lot of work to do quick," Rusty said. "With me helpin' yuh, of course."

"What kind of work?"

"Cleanin' up this cabin and makin' it look decent. We ain't got but little time. But we'll eat before we start in."

Rusty began eating bacon and beans and cold sourdough biscuits like a famished man. Pappy also went after the food avidly. Pappy was a silent, deliberate eater.

WHEN they had cleaned up the food and emptied the coffee pot, Rusty lit his pipe and propped his chair up against the wall and made himself comfortable.

"How are things in the camp?" he asked.

"Are yuh meanin' in general or personal?"

"General first."

"Well, about the same. Not much change. One gent has been makin' hay while the sun shines."

"Meanin' what?"

"Meanin' Elmer Jordan. He's been shinin' up to Lucy Bloon considerable. Made a good strike on his claim right after yuh went away and is struttin' all over the place. Spends half his time at the store. Folks say as how him and Lucy are goin' to be married in the spring. But mebbe that'll be changed, now that you've come back."

"I don't aim to change it any," Rusty said.

"What's that, lad? Do yuh mean that yuh're goin' to stand back and let that skunk of an Elmer Jordan have her? She acted like a little flirt between you two, I know, but a gal always likes to do somethin' like that. Gives her an idea she's a man killer. But I've got an idea she likes you best, Rusty. Yore bein' away might have made her lonesome and opened her eyes."

"Bein' away opened my eyes, too, Pappy."

"Yeah? Well, anyhow, I reckon yuh can take her away from that pesky Elmer Jordan. You and him bein' enemies so long, yuh won't want to let him get the girl. I reckon yuh'll be marryin' her come spring. I'll leave the cabin and go live with Jed Jones. He's been after me to do it."

"I ain't goin' to marry Lucy Bloon, Pappy. There's a law agin it."

"Law agin a man marryin'?"

"Agin him marryin' twice at the same time," Rusty explained. "I'm married already. Got me a fine wife while I was away, Pappy."

"Godfrey!"

"She's a fine woman, a school teacher. Met her at a church party, and we fell in love right away."

"Where is she, then? Why didn't yuh fetch her with yuh?"

"I wrote yuh all about it, but yuh was too lazy to read the letter. Told yuh we'd be here in time for New Year's Eve, and for yuh to clean up the cabin good."

"Godfrey! Where is she, I asked?"

"I rode my pony through, Pappy, because I didn't want to sell him. And she's comin' by train to the county seat, and I arranged to have her drove over. She should be here by nightfall. Got a telegram from her at the county seat. I rode ahead to see that everything was all right. And the cabin's as dirty as sin."

"We'll clean her up right away, lad. I'll put water to bilin'. We'll scrub everything. Got plenty of time. Godfrey! Wait till I let folks know about this."

"Yuh ain't goin' to let anybody know, Pappy. I want to surprise 'em after she gets here. At the church tonight will be a good time. Let's get to work. Start that water heatin'."

For more than an hour, they swept and scrubbed. They cleansed utensils and dishes, mopped the floor, and washed the windows on the inside. They made up the bunks anew, and even rearranged food supplies on the shelves in the little store-room.

"I'll move in with Jed Jones tonight," Pappy said, as they were finishing the work. "Tomorrer I'll give yuh an accountin' and turn over the dust and nuggets."

"And yuh'll take a share for stayin' here and workin' the claim," Rusty informed him. "Yuh've got it comin', Pappy. I hit it rich while I was away."

"How's that? Yuh mean by findin' yoreself a fine wife?"

"That, and somethin' more, Pappy. I owned a couple of claims in that old district around Indian Butte. Remember?"

"Yeah. New field that soon petered out."

"They thought it'd petered out, Pappy. But they made a big strike, and a syndicate wanted my claims to add to others. Gave

me a big price for 'em."

"Godfrey! Wait till Elmer Jordan hears that."

"Bundle up, Pappy, and we'll go down to the store. Yuh'll have to help me. I want a lot of fancy eatin' stuff such as womenfolks like."

"Wear yore gun, lad. Elmer Jordan's shore to be hangin' around the store. Hangs around there most of the time, since he ain't workin' his claim. Too lazy to thaw gravel."

A FEW minutes later, they left the cozy cabin and started down the trail. The wind had abated some, and it was starting to snow in earnest. "Blizzard comin'," Pappy Smeade judged. "First bad one of the season. Liable to choke the pass."

"I'm shore hopin' my wife gets here before that happens," Rusty said. "If it starts gettin' bad, I'll ride out to meet her."

Their boots crunched the frozen ground as they entered the street and went along the walk to Ed Bloon's store. When they entered, they found the place comfortably filled with Coyote Creek citizens, most of whom were huddling around the red-hot stove.

Some greeted Rusty cordially and shot questions at him, and others acted with reticence, as if not wishing to appear as taking sides in a controversy.

Ed Bloon eyed him peculiarly when Rusty stopped at the counter. Pappy Smeade had loitered behind, and Rusty guessed he was telling the citizens about the money he, Rusty, had made by selling his old Indian Butte claims to a syndicate. News of his success would be all through the camp within a couple of hours.

Rusty gave Ed Bloon an order to be filled. Bloon's eyes widened when he read the list.

"You're gettin' fancy, ain't yuh?" the storekeeper asked. "Some of this is puny eatin' for a husky outdoors man."

"Mebbe I'm turnin' soft," Rusty suggested. He got out a sack of tobacco and paper and started making a cigarette as Bloon searched his shelves for goods to fill the order.

Bloon and his daughter had living quarters in the rear of the store. Now the door was opened, and Lucy Bloon came into the store room. She had dressed her hair and put on her prettiest dress, and Rusty guessed it was not because of the New Year's Eve party at the church.

Rusty finished making his cigarette and

[*Turn page*]

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turned to watch Bloon put up the things he had ordered. He ignored Lucy. But she was not to be ignored. She swayed across the store, nodding to the men gathered there, and came to a stop at the counter at Rusty's side.

"Well, Rusty, so you've come home," she said, smiling and dimpling at him.

There had been a time when those smiles and dimples had set his blood afire, but they had no effect on him now. He turned his head and touched the brim of his hat politely, but his face did not light up with pleasure at her nearness, as it had formerly.

"Glad to be home again," he said, in a matter-of-fact voice. "Looks and feels like there's a blizzard comin'."

"Who cares? Can't you talk about anything but the weather?" She pouted a little, as her father went along the shelves to find something.

In former days, Rusty had liked that pout, too, and had thought it cute. Now it left him cold. He wondered what he ever had seen in this little mining camp flirt.

"Weather's mighty important," he told her.

Nobody was near them now, and Lucy's father was at the other end of the store. She stepped closer to him and lowered her voice.

"Rusty, I've got to see you alone, talk to you," she said. "I don't know what you've heard since you got home, but it's probably wrong."

"Ain't heard much of anything that interests me, except old Pappy Smeade's goin' on."

"Please, Rusty. I—you know I like you. And you've been away so long. Walk with me to the church when it's time for the meeting."

"I've got to take some groceries to the cabin," he told her. "I'll be busy this evenin'. And what would Elmer Jordan say if I walked to the church with you?"

"He hasn't the right to say anything."

"I've heard yuh're expectin' to marry him in the spring."

"I don't see how such news gets around," she protested. "Somebody starts a rumor like that and everybody takes it for the truth. He's asked me, of course, same as you've asked me a few times. But nothing's settled."

Her father came back to report that there were a few things on the list that he didn't have in stock, and Rusty ignored Lucy while he checked the list over and suggested substitutes.

"Fancy groceries," Lucy said. "Rusty, are you fixing to give a cabin party to celebrate? I've heard you sold some old claims at a profit."

"That's right. Indian Butte stuff."

"Why won't you walk to the church with me? Are you afraid of Elmer Jordan?"

"Didn't ever act like I am, did I?"

BLOON finished filling the order and packed the stuff in a box and a gunnysack. Rusty paid in cash, stuffed the change into his pocket, and looked around for Pappy Smeade to help carry the supplies to the cabin. Pappy was having a New Year's drink out of a flask that had been offered him, and Rusty decided to wait a minute before calling him.

Lucy edged closer to him as Bloon went up the counter to give a customer some tobacco.

"Rusty, I can't understand the way you act," she complained. "Don't you like me any more? I can't help it if Elmer Jordan pesters around me."

"I reckon yuh've encouraged him plenty," Rusty said.

"Oh, a girl likes to have men pay attention to her."

"Yeah, so I've noticed."

Men chattering in the store suddenly grew quiet. Rusty saw Lucy's eyes bulge and color flood her face. He turned slowly to see Elmer Jordan, his old enemy, advancing toward him. Jordan's eyes were ablaze. His hands had become fists at his sides. He was wearing a gun, as was Rusty.

"Stand away from my girl, Rusty!" Jordan ordered

Rusty calmly took the cigarette from his mouth, dropped it upon the floor and trod upon it until it was extinguished. Then he raised his head and his eyes met Jordan's squarely.

"It'd be better, Jordan, if yuh told yore girl to stand away from me," he replied. "I'm here buyin' a mess of grub, and she came and stood beside me. What's wrong with that? And she's intimated that she ain't exactly yore girl."

"Stand away from her!" Jordan raged. "Yuh'd have done better to stay away from the camp. This place ain't big enough for us both. I know half a dozen men who'd buy yore claim at its real value. My advice to

you is to sell out and get out."

"I've been hereabouts for quite some time, Jordan, and I reckon to stay as long as I want to."

"Yuh do? We'll see about that, Rusty! Since yuh're askin' for it, I'll give it to yuh. I'm orderin' yuh to get out of Coyote Creek before noon tomorrow, and stay out! Yuh can leave yore claim in somebody's hands to sell for yuh."

"If I don't care to leave?" Rusty asked.

"If yuh ain't gone by noon tomorrow, I'll shoot yuh at sight!" Jordan thundered. "And between now and then, stay away from my girl. Don't speak to her. She's engaged to marry me, and she'll keep her promise, if yuh don't go to pesterin' around her with yore mushy ways."

"Well, I—I aim to keep away from her," Rusty said.

Subdued exclamations came from men in the store who heard that. Rusty Rawlins was backing down before Elmer Jordan, a thing they had thought Rusty never would do. It was something not to be believed.

Rusty picked up the box of groceries and called Pappy Smeade. Pappy picked up the sack, and they left the store and started up the street on their way to the cabin.

"I arranged with Jed Jones to move in with him tonight," Pappy said.

"Then that's settled."

"Yep. Settled more'n a lot of other things, seems like. Rusty, how come yuh let that pesky Elmer Jordan back yuh down?"

"All the cards ain't been dealt yet, Pappy. Maybe I've got a couple of aces up my sleeve, too. Did yuh tell anybody about me gettin' married?"

"Not a word, Rusty, since yeh told e not to. But I did tell 'em about yeh makin' a lot of money sellin' them claims."

"That part's all right," Rusty said.

They plodded on through the gathering night. The wind had freshened and half the falling snow was sleet. "Reg'lar norther startin'," Pappy opined. "If it hits hard, the pass'll be choked by mornin'."

They came to the cabin and stowed the groceries away. Rusty built a fire in the fireplace, not content with the small cooking stove's heat. He wanted the cabin to be warm and cozy for his bride.

They heard the church bell ring, calling people to the New Year's Eve meeting. Nobody came near the cabin.

[*Turn page*]

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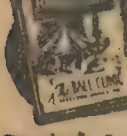

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His work done, Rusty opened the door and went out. Sheets of sleet and snow slapped at him, carried on a raging wind. The norther was upon them, all right.

"I'll saddle up and go meet 'em," he told Pappy, when he went back into the house. "I had it all figgered out. If the train was on time at the county seat, the man I hired to drive her over should have started at once, bringin' her and her baggage. No reason why they shouldn't have got through the pass all right and be comin' down the slope. But I'll ride to meet 'em."

PAPPY helped him put bridle and saddle on the pony. Rusty filled his canteen with hot water into which he poured a small quantity of whisky, for use in case of emergency. Then he mounted and rode, leaving Pappy at the cabin to keep the fires going.

Rusty had to ride through the street to get into the trail that led to the pass. Men going in and out of the store and saloon saw him. Word spread swiftly. Rusty Rawlins was riding away from the camp. Elmer Jordan had driven him out. Ordered to leave by noon tomorrow, he probably feared the storm would choke the pass and he couldn't get out, so he was riding tonight.

Rusty imagined that such reports were spreading through the town, but cared nothing about it. He bent his head against the force of the wind and urged his pony on. The snow was not deep enough yet to start drifting under the force of the wind.

He had gone about a mile when he saw a pinpoint of light bobbing up and down in the distance. He guessed it was a lantern fastened to the side of a light wagon. Rusty kicked at the pony's flanks and urged him on.

It wasn't long before they met. He shouted, and the driver pulled up the team. Rusty's wife was on the seat beside the driver, well bundled up against the cold. Rusty rode close beside the wagon and bent and kissed her cold lips.

"Yuh're almost home," he told her. "Mebbe I should have met yuh at the county seat, but I wanted to tend to things here. Pappy and me got the cabin clean, and we laid in groceries, and yuh're in time to go to the New Year's Eve celebration at the church and meet all the folks."

He rode beside the wagon until they came to the end of the street. Looking ahead, he saw nobody under the lights that came

through the windows of the store and saloon. He rode on the opposite side of the wagon as it passed these establishments, and they went by unseen.

At the cabin, he helped his bride off the wagon and carried her inside. He introduced Pappy Smeade, and helped her get off her things. She was a medium-sized brunette, Pappy saw, with a pleasant smile, and she gave an intimation of being the practical sort, not a nitwit like Lucy Bloon.

Rusty went out to see the man about the team. There was a stable in the town that could be rented. Not until tomorrow would they know the extent of the storm and learn whether the pass was still open so the county seat man could drive back.

Back in the cabin, he found Pappy ready to leave for Jed Jones' place. After Pappy had departed, Rusty put his arms around his wife and kissed her.

"How yuh like it?" he asked.

"Very much, Rusty. Wait till I put up my curtains at the windows and do a lot of other things."

"You set down, Emma, and let me tell yuh things," he said.

He told her about Lucy Bloon and Elmer Jordan, and all the rest.

"Rusty, if he hurts you—" she began.

"I can handle him, Emma. Got it all planned. I want to take yuh to the church now and give the folks a surprise. I've kept our marriage a secret. Most of the people think I rode away tonight on account of Jordan's threat, so's I could get through the pass before it was choked. Know that as well as if I could read their minds."

As they neared the little log church later, they heard singing. Then it grew quiet, and they knew some school child was "speaking a piece." Rusty opened the door during the applause that followed the recitation, and ushered Emma in. A few turned to glance at the late comers, but did not recognize them because they were bundled up so against the cold.

They took off their coats and wraps in the back of the church and added them to a pile of garments in a corner. Then Rusty Rawlins led his bride down the middle aisle, his head proudly erect. Everybody turned to look. A chorus of gasps of surprise ran through the audience.

The chairman of the meeting called an intermission for coffee and sandwiches as Rusty and his wife selected seats. Rusty

[*Turn page*]

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looked across the aisle and saw the startled expression in the face of Lucy Bloon. A couple of women approached, and Rusty stood and made the introduction that startled Coyote Creek: "This is my wife, Emma. We were married four weeks ago, and I brought her home tonight."

THAT news flashed through the audience in record time, and men and women came forward to shower their congratulations. Lucy Bloon kept aloof. Rusty knew some of the men had left the little church to spread the news in Bloon's store.

He left his wife in the care of some of the women, and went to the rear of the church and bundled up, then went outside into the stinging snow and sleet. He fought against the storm and got to Bloon's store.

The place was filled with men of the town, and Elmer Jordan was among them. A sudden hush came over the gathering as Rusty Rawlins removed his heavy overcoat. They could see he was wearing his gun beneath his suit coat, and now he opened the coat and exposed belt and holster.

"Jordan!" he barked.

Elmer Jordan lurched forward, his eyes narrowed and watchful.

"Well, Rusty?" he asked.

"Yuh ordered me to quit Coyote Creek before noon tomorrow. I ain't leavin'. So if yuh want to make any move about it, now's yore time."

"I understand yuh brought home a bride," Jordan said.

"I did. But that's got nothin' to do about yore threat. What have yuh got to say, Jordan? Yuh told me Coyote Creek ain't big enough to hold us both. And I'm stayin'. If yuh want to leave, Jordan, I'll buy yore claim at its true value."

He looked Jordan straight in the eyes and took a step toward him.

"I wasn't runnin' away when I rode out of town this evenin', Jordan. I was ridin' to meet my wife, who was comin' from the county seat. Yuh could never make me run away from anywhere, Jordan. If yuh want to settle this now, yuh're wearin' a gun, same as me."

Jordan backed away, and Rusty watched him carefully. But all the fight had gone out of Jordan under the blaze in Rusty's angry eyes.

"I—I reckon we don't have to fight about it," Jordan said. "I—well, I was mad and

jealous when I said what I did. No reason for me to be jealous any more, since yuh're married. I'm ready to call quits."

"About leavin' the camp?" Rusty questioned.

"Well, I've been thinkin' some of sellin' my claim and goin' to the county seat and openin' a business. Mebbe Lucy would like to live there after we're married. I'll do some plannin' about it and go to the county seat and have a look around, soon as a man can get through the pass."

Rusty brushed past him, almost elbowing him out of the way, and went to the counter.

"I want a couple of pounds of hard candy," he told Bloon. "Forgot to put it on my list. My wife likes it."

Bloon put up the candy, and Rusty paid him, put on his overcoat, and with the bag of candy under his arm left the store and hurried to the church. A few minutes later, he was sitting beside his wife and brazenly holding her hand.

"Everything all right, Rusty?" she whispered.

"Yeah," he replied. "Everything's all right. It's five minutes to midnight, 'cordin' to my watch. We're startin' this New Year together."

DOC SWAP HIRES A HAND

(Concluded from page 78)

From outside came another dull thud, followed by a clang of steel on steel.

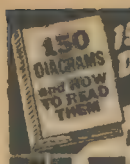
MacLoyd sank weakly into a chair. His face was white. "Okay, Doc," he wheezed. "Yuh win! What's yore price?"

Doc looked deeply hurt.

"Why," he said, "I ain't got no price. Might swap, though. Reckon if I was to play at Sally's weddin', and yuh was to buy Useless a one-way railroad ticket, and was to swap yore purty red shirt to-boot for this ole one I got from Bill Clink, we might make a deal."

MacLoyd began to unbutton his red silk shirt. Through the window came a gentle, musical snore.

Doc smiled happily and handed the old shirt to the sheriff. He reckoned he'd miss that snoring. But he guessed life was worthwhile, anyway, even if about everybody in Dry Bluffs was busy practising up for the horseshoe championship. Especially worthwhile when you had a big wedding dance to fiddle for and a beautiful red-gold fiddle to do the fiddlin' on.



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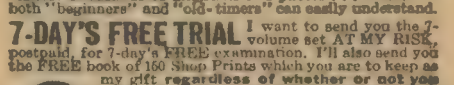

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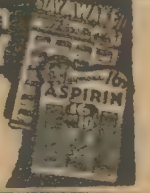

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THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 8)

be plumb worthless but they bring quite a price nowadays, specially in parts where dudes are building themselves play ranches. Use 'em for decorations in gardens, fences and gates.

A wheel from an old stagecoach or freight wagon, with history attached, real or imaginary, is valued from $5 to $25. A rattly-spoked buggy wheel, $1 up. A real trophy is a wheel from an old rubber-tired phaeton or surrey, which was the last word in ease and elegance when I did my early traveling.

The first automobiles had such wheels, with solid rubber tires, and they also were equipped with a whip socket on the dash—simply because that's what folks were used to and demanded.

The Trouble-Making Cat

Pioneer railroading played just as big a part in Western history as wagonwheels but the changes in rail travel haven't been as sensational as in private transportation. I got in a confab not long since with an old railroader who gave me an entertaining account of how a cat disrupted service one time on the Texas Pacific.

The telegraph operator at a small lonely station had a pet tabby that liked to nap in the bay window by the clicking telegraph instrument, which place furnished the advantage all cats enjoy of being able to see all around yet feel reasonably secure.

This cat was pretty much used to anything. It wasn't afraid of roaring trains, thundering locomotives or any usual goings-on. But one day into the waiting room comes a dude lugging a trophy of a hunt. It was the fresh head and antlers of a fine buck. He held it up to show to the station agent. The cat roused and took a look. Its eyes went as big as full moons.

"Then trouble broke loose," chuckled the old railroader. "That cat was plumb terrified. It fuzzed up and leaped, scrambling up the window shade. The shade flew up, jolted off of its fastenings and down came the works—shade, cat and all onto the telegrapher's table, tangled with railroad lanterns, flags and flares.

"He'd just laid out train orders, all neatly stacked and properly organized. In the next second, orders flew all over the place, mixed up with yowling cat and a tangle of window blinds. The falling shade roller hit the telegraph key and under the mess it was ticking frantically as the operator at the next station up the line demanded to know what the Samhill was going on, a holdup or what.

"About that time the cat spotted the ticket

hole and beelined for it and made a getaway out through the waiting room, across the platform and down the tracks.

"Well sir, that cat was the only traffic on the line that day. Every train had to be held up until the telegrapher unscrambled those orders and got the Texas Pacific on a running basis again. How about the dude? He had to throw that deer head away. It got fly blowed and spoiled before the next train came along."

But sometimes benefits rise out of just such strange and unforeseeable accidents. They tell me that gold was discovered by accident in '49 and the first petroleum was discovered by accident in Pennsylvania when some men were digging for water and hit "coal oil", which was the start of the giant industry that has revolutionized all transportation.

Even now, a good many oil discoveries are made by accident, although the big oil companies have armies of expert geologists poking around and looking for new fields. Just this past summer I was on the scene of what may turn out to be a "black gold" strike. A man was digging himself a septic tank and came onto sticky sand. He sized it up and wondered awhile then packed a handful around the neighborhood to show folks and ask what they could make of it.

There was a man from Texas thereabouts. He took one look, then sniffed the sand and yelped:

"Oil! I used to work on a well crew. That's just what oil sand smelled like. Mister, you're a millionaire!"

So the "millionaire" quit work on his septic tank, took a sample of his find to a laboratory and the chemist said yes, it sure enough tested to be a fine grade of crude oil.

I haven't yet heard the outcome, but I do recollect one time that a west Texas rancher found a low ridge on his property where grass refused to grow, got to poking around and found that the ground was made barren by seepage from some pocket deep under the surface.

They dug for oil but hit a gasser which caught fire and set the surrounding prairie ablaze, destroying a season's forage, before it sanded in and left him worse off than he had been.

Pleasure Is a Business

It's an old saying that business comes before pleasure but out West this year more folks than ever got convinced that pleasure is business and a mighty profitable one.

The second biggest industry in Oregon, where logging comes first, is the tourist trade. More people were on the go than

[*Turn page*]

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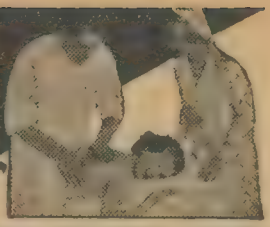

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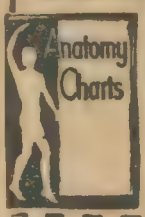

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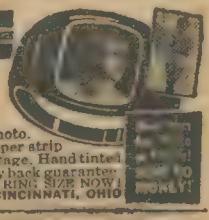

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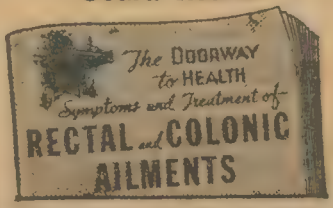

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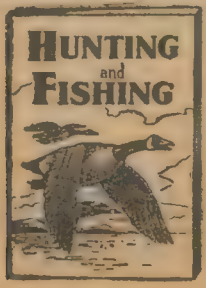

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ever before. Overnight accommodations sprang up everywhere but still there wasn't enough to take care of everybody.

The big National Parks, such as Yellowstone, were plumb snowed under by visiting tourists. The latter had some sort of harsh experiences and their holler about it was heard all the way to Washington. Park resort spots were run down and neglected during the war years and not restored to good condition and a heap of folks were plenty sore and told their Congressmen about it.

A similar state of affairs existed in the hundreds of recreation centers in the U.S. Forest Service. Fine camps built some years ago by the CCC boys have gone to pot.

For lack of firewood, which used to be hauled in to camp areas in cord lengths, some onery visitors took to chopping up and burning benches and tables. Things got so bad that by next summer there's pretty likely to be something done about it.

If towns and counties and states have found out that wholesome outdoor recreation is about the greatest asset any region can have outside of steady payrolls, then Uncle Sam better resume his efforts in the great national playgrounds, *muy pronto.*

I've heard it said that parts of the country that enjoy abundant outdoor life have a lower crime rate than others less favored. When folks have a way to enjoy themselves naturally, they keep out of mischief and wrongdoing and overindulgence in artificial pastimes, that's a cinch.

Well, so long, folks. I'll be back next issue with more news and gossip!

—CAPTAIN STARR.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

OLD Possum Ransom had never harmed a soul in his life. He had his shack and his little homestead, with title clear, and he wanted little else in life. So he could not understand why anyone should wish him harm.

At first, when Sheriff Craig told him his title was not good and that Big Ed Pallette of the giant EP ranch had bought his land, Possum could not believe it. He couldn't believe it even when the posse stood before his door and the sheriff held the eviction notice in his hand.

"I was here 'fore Pallette," snapped Possum. "Bin here fifty-one years come next July."

"You can't show a warranty deed or paper to prove this land is yours," the sheriff said. "Pallette owns it now."

Old Possum looked at the sheriff and the posse with dazed eyes. He looked at Big Ed Pallette, stubbornness and greed showing

plain on the rancher's horsy face. Behind Pallette was his partner Vale, a stout man in a dark suit and string tie, with a bald patch in his chestnut hair. He had a broken nose, very broad at the bridge and peeking around each side of this damaged appendage was a violet-colored, alert eye.

Possum Ransom dropped a gnarled hand to the holster of the Frontier Model Colt revolver at his hip.

"This here is my title. You can't push me around. G'wan, git, Pallette!"

Snarling, Ransom pulled the gun—a mistake, no doubt. There was a sudden movement, a pistol blared. Possum Ransom went down, a dazed look in his bleared eyes. The Frontier Model fell in the sand, and Possum's neck was limp.

It was Vale who had shot Ransom dead. Vale held a short-barreled, large caliber pistol of newest make in his hand.

"I had to shoot, Sheriff," said Vale. "He was going to fire at us. It was self-defense."

The cowboys of the posse stared in shock; they saw the poor bundle of what had been an old, harmless fellow lying by his unpainted shack.

The sheriff swore. "You shouldn't've done it, Vale."

"The old fool would've hurt somebody; it was self-defense," insisted Barney Vale.

And there the sheriff had to let it go. Possum had reached for his gun. Somehow the sheriff doubted he meant to shoot. But who could prove it now?

Disturbed and uneasy, the posse buried Possum Ransom and moved on to the next place, the Garrett ranch. Lew Garrett, a hard-working rancher, was told the same thing. His title was no good, he was to move on.

Garrett, like any other man caught so, showed fight and there would have been trouble too, had not his wife and daughter held him back. Humbled, he promised to be out of the house he had thought his own by the following Monday.

But Lew Garrett was far from satisfied. He knew his title at Austin was good. There was something definitely dirty about this business. That night he slipped into town.

[*Turn page*]

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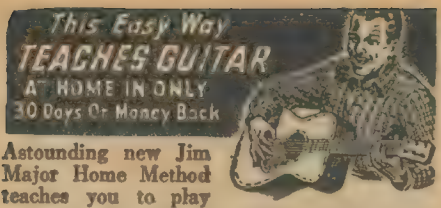

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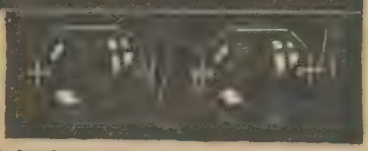

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He made his way to the back of the Golden Horns, the saloon where he had watched Big Ed Pallette and his partner, Barney Vale, disappear. Vale and Pallette were in a private room in the back and when Garrett eased up beneath the window, he could catch their voices.

"I'm worried, Vale," Pallette was saying. "You sure this is all safe and legal-like, what we're doin'? You sure there won't be no trouble?"

"I've told you a hunerd times you don't need to worry, Pallette. I've taken care of everything."

"But s'posin' Garrett and others find out you done took them papers—"

So there was dirty work afoot! Garrett knew his title had been good. And Barney Vale had somehow gotten hold of the title papers. Here was proof!

But he never had a chance to do anything about it. A gun muzzle rammed into his spine and a voice snarled:

"Reach, you!"

At the sound, Vale and Pallette hurried to the window. They sized up the situation at a glance. And Vale whipped out the same pistol that had killed Possum Ransom. The gun roared and another dangerous witness was swept out of the way.

So it was that at length a letter came to Captain Bill McDowell of the Texas Rangers from Lew Garrett's widow. He read it with a heavy foreboding tugging at his heart.

"Land, land, land," he murmured. "It's a great invention but it sure causes a lot of trouble." He raised his voice to the clerk outside. "Send Ranger Hatfield in, pronto!"

And a moment later, Jim Hatfield, the Lone Wolf Ranger, was taking instructions for his latest case, the case which has come to be known as SIXGUN SYNDICATE. Author Jackson Cole has outdone himself in creating a powerful drama of real people swept by love, hate and greed, as well as the decent and kindly emotions still in fashion, like loyalty and pride and honesty.

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It was a time when sometimes only the wits and guns of a single Ranger stood between jungle chaos and some sort of law and order. If the Ranger failed, law and civilization failed with him.

Jim Hatfield wasn't used to failure. For he had a superb brain under his thatch of black hair, a clear, logical, cool thinking machine. And in his muscles and quick fingers were the ingredients of the greatest fighting machine ever turned loose against the greedy

ones who sought to rule by the terror of the sixgun.

Climb into your saddle and ride with Jim Hatfield on another manhunt in SIXGUN SYNDICATE by Jackson Cole, full-length novel featured in our next issue. With it, as always, will be quick-trigger short stories of western action and features—as well as *The Frontier Post* by Captain Starr. Be on hand for some swell reading!

OUR MAIL BAG

OUR mail bag is bulging so full of interesting letters this month that instead of commenting on each one as I like to do, I am going to use that space instead to get as many letters, condensed, as I can, into print. Most of them speak for themselves and need little comment anyway. So here goes:

RANGE PIRATES was the best Jim Hatfield yet. I think it would be fine if Jim had a young companion.
—*Tony Chance, Detroit, Mich.*

In one issue Capt. Starr, writing about Will Rogers, implies that his education ended with McGuffey's Fourth Reader, then in another place notices that at the age of 14 he attended a military academy in Missouri. That was Kemper Military Academy. I had a cousin in Will's class and he says Will was practising with the rope at that time.
—*Eugene Davis, Alton, Ill.*

I think Jim Hatfield should have a partner to help him out. It would also make the stories better if he

[*Turn page*]

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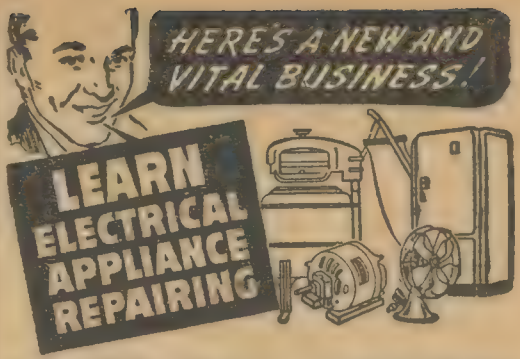

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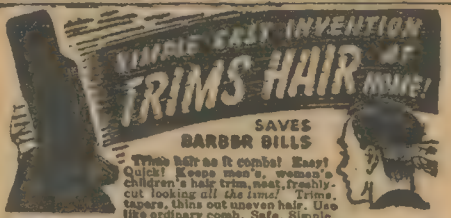

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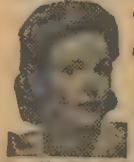

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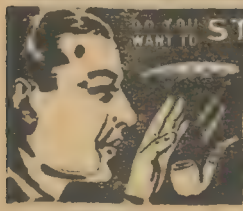

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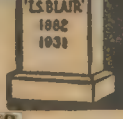

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got mixed up with a girl now and then. Why don't you print the story of how Jim Hatfield got started on his career and how he got Goldy, his fine horse?

—*Billy Hamilton, Trenton, Tenn.*

The first time I came across your magnificent magazine I was delighted and have since done my best to always get hold of the latest TEXAS RANGERS. Good luck to you and my sincere congratulations to Mr. Jackson Cole. Tell him a girl for Jim doesn't seem to fit in as far as I'm concerned.

—*E. C. Logan, Buenos Aires, Argentina.*

The Hatfield stories I've liked best were RANGE PIRATES, FREE RANGE, BAD MEDICINE FOR BUCKAROOS, THE EMPIRE TRAIL and DEATH RIDERS. Don't let him get married. Would you please put a picture of Goldy on the front page?

—*Johnny Seadare, Johnston, Nebr.*

Please put lots of fist fights in the next issue. And keep Jim Hatfield single.

—*Jimmy Ketchum, Lawton, Okla.*

My vote for the best Hatfield story is THE LUCKY HAMMER. Next I'd rate THE DEVIL'S LEGION and THE CRIMSON FLOWER. Don't let Jim Hatfield get married. I like the DOC SWAP stories too, so keep 'em coming.—*Franklin Curl, Cardington, Ohio.*

Our whole family reads TEXAS RANGERS and all agree Jim Hatfield should not marry. It would spoil the stories. Keep up the good work and don't let Goldy get hurt too bad.

—*(Miss) Jo Ann Stearns, Seaside, Oregon.*

A bit of romance would not hurt. The only thing TEXAS RANGERS lacks is romance. Hatfield always meets a beautiful girl and that's the end of it. If he were to fall in love one time it would help a lot.

—*Wayne Wright, Ellensburg, Wash.*

I agree with Luther Davidson of Gastonia, N. C. If Jim Hatfield had a wife and children he'd worry about them and wouldn't be able to keep his mind on his job. He'd worry about getting killed, too. Don't let him fall in love or marry.

—*Mrs. W. H. Strube, Basin, Wyoming.*

I'd like to ask Arleta Wilson why Jim Hatfield would seem more realistic if romance was brought into his life. I've known men as ruthless and even more cold-blooded and I didn't have any trouble believing they were real. Leave the women out.

—*PFC. Bert D. Imeson, USMC., Earle, N. J.*

In IRON MEN AND GOLD you didn't say anything more about the girl and Lobo. Why didn't Jim Hatfield adopt the dog and have him go on some adventures with him? The story was very good, otherwise. I liked THE KID AND HIS YELLOW DOG, but it wasn't long enough. Thank you for the wonderful stories.

—*(Miss) M. J. Crouse, Bethlehem, Pa.*

For heaven's sake don't let Jim Hatfield get married. I like romance but not with Hatfield. If it were another boy and girl in the story I wouldn't mind. But I'm afraid Hatfield's wife would tell some crooks that he is a Ranger and then—oh, oh.

—*La Rue Frederick, Banks, Alabama.*

Personally I think the Jim Hatfield stories are perfect. But I see there is a regular fight going on and I might as well join. I DON'T think Hatfield should get married. Capt. Bill wouldn't want a married man for a Ranger. His wife would be alone all the time because he is always off somewhere. She couldn't go with him and if she did people would soon learn to recognize him as a Ranger. You'll have to leave him the way he is if you want me to like him.

—*Donald Schminkey, Cedar Rapids, Ia.*

I've seen plenty of Texas Rangers and I've never seen one that was any different from the average man where a beautiful girl is concerned. I don't think the stories would be hurt at all, but would be more realistic if Hatfield fell in love. Not the mushy kind, but the kind a lonely man like Hatfield would make.

—*S. T. Lowe, USMC., Grand Prairie, Tex.*

I've been reading TEXAS RANGERS for some time, but I don't want you to have Hatfield get married. I wish you'd pull Goldy out and put him on the front cover. Anyway the stories are super.

—*Steve Anderson, Rosemead, Calif.*

In the Hatfield versus love battle, if Jim Hatfield were to fall in love and get married the book would be a love Western instead of a Rangers Western.

—*Arnold Dunn, Sutton, Vt.*

I like TEXAS RANGERS best of any western book I have read. I think if Jim Hatfield fell in love and got married the story would be more exciting. Let him fall in love and get married.

—Vestal Adair Grant, New Bern, N. C.

Why not settle the Hatfield versus love question as you have in the past? Let Jim help get that young couple together as he rounds up the loose ends in his case.

—Irene Nielson, New York.

A man can't go on forever without falling in love. I think Luther Davidson was right in saying that Jim Hatfield wouldn't be a good Ranger if he was constantly reminded of his wife and child. Who said anything about getting married? He doesn't have to. But the stories would seem more real if he just got interested in a girl once in a while. Maybe a girl that is working under cover for the outlaws. Once in about three or four stories would help satisfy the readers who want some romance. That's still giving the others 4 to 1 odds in the stories. Isn't that fair?

—Mickie Jo, N. St. Paul, Minn.

Sure, let Jim Hatfield flirt with the girls. After all I don't think he is a woman hater. Besides, girls weren't so bad looking in those days. Ask any old timer.

—Donald Cloud, Santa Paula, Calif.

Well, I'd like to go on and print some more, and sure would if I had more space. But one thing stands out among the hundreds of letters received—the vast majority of readers don't want Jim Hatfield to settle down and get married. There has been a good deal of discussion on this subject—and the matter may now be considered decided, at least for the present.

There was a fine letter from Randall L. Hoisington of Palo Alto, California, which was too long to print and too good to condense, but I'd just like to say howdy to Randall and tell him how much we all enjoyed his letter and say thanks.

And there was a letter from Richard Dukette of Center Barnstead, New Hampshire, who is only 13 years old, but is going to be somebody some day or I miss my bet. Keep at it, Dick, and you're plumb right about education, you can't get too much.

Drop us a line, folks, we'll print your letter if we can and we try to get in as many each issue as possible. We're always glad to hear from our readers and see what they think of TEXAS RANGERS. Address The Editor, TEXAS RANGERS, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y. *Adios!*

—THE EDITOR.

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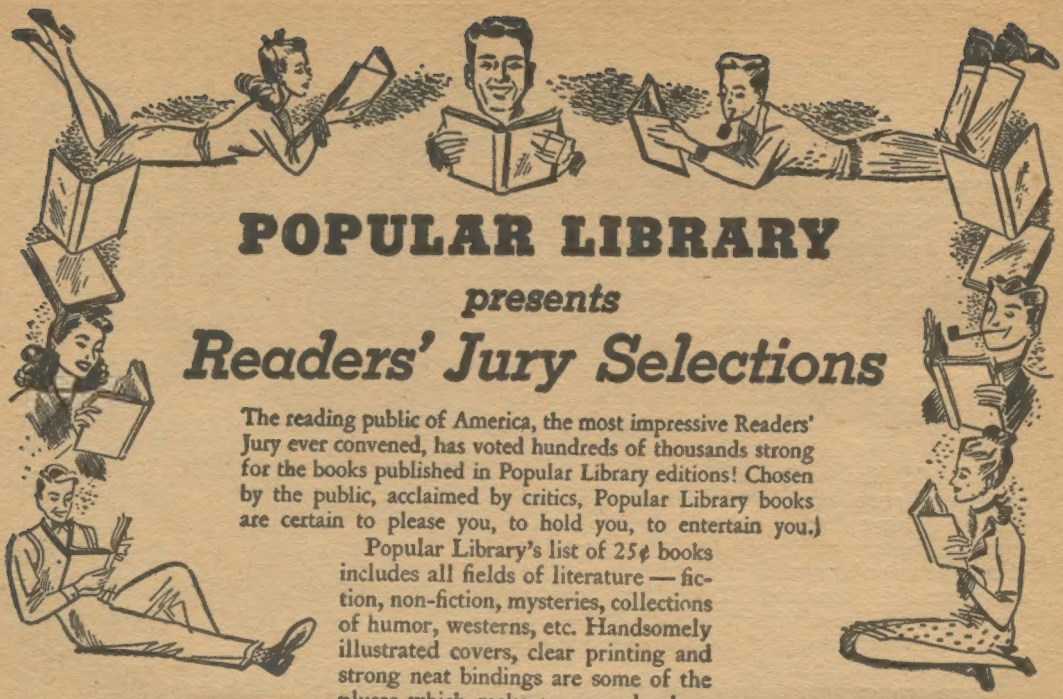

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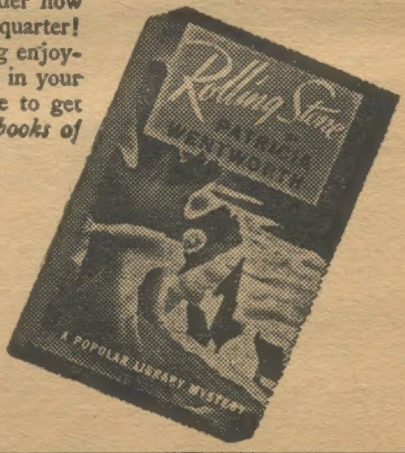

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